JUNE 1953 35¢

# Universe

SCIENCE FICTION

FIRST ISSUE!

## STOWAWAY

Mack Reynolds

THEODORE STURGEON's Most Daring Story

"The World Well Lost"

MURRAY LEINSTER—NELSON BOND—ROBERT BLOCH

## *WE SAY HELLO*

THERE have been enough new science fiction magazines lately to keep the nation's hundreds of thousands of fans busy sampling. They have been good, bad, and indifferent, depending on the varied qualifications of their editors and their writers. They have been announced with fanfare, drums, firecrackers and rockets and they are generally claimed (by their editors) to be world-shaking, soul-shaking, or cosmos-shaking.

We must confess that our purpose is more modest. We have been a fan and student of science fiction for more than 20 years. We have our ideas of what a good science fiction magazine ought to contain and they are very simple. This first issue of UNIVERSE will show you how well we have met this simple objective. It is only this: To give you the best science fiction stories published in America today!

***GEORGE BELL***
***Editor***

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**EDITOR** **GEORGE BELL**

**ART DIRECTOR** **MALCOLM H. SMITH**


*Cover Painting by Malcolm H. Smith, illustrating THE STOWAWAY*

*Illustrations by Michael Becker, W. E. Terry, Bert Duur, H. W. McCauley, Malcolm H. Smith, John Cadel, Herb Ruud and Gredno Mahasm*


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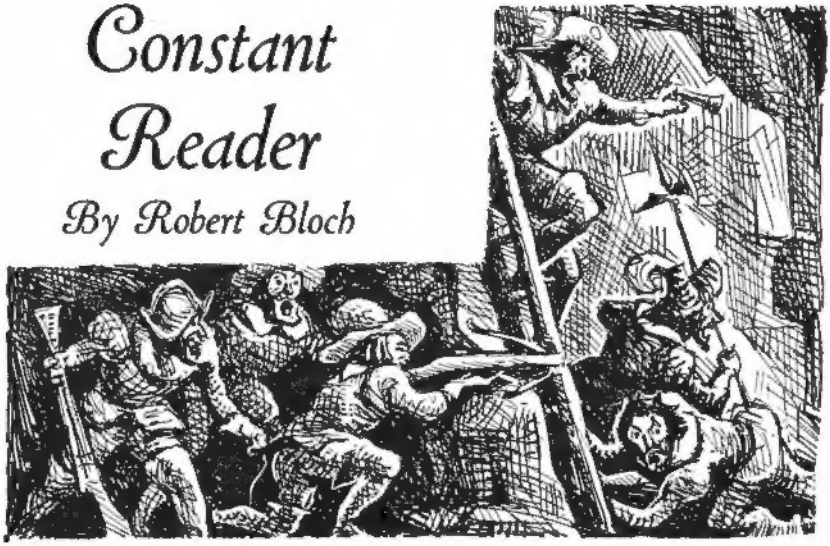
# Constant Reader

## By Robert Bloch



ONCE upon a time they were called straitjackets. When you put one on, you were "in restraint" according to the polite psychiatric jargon of the day. I know, because I've read all about it in books. Yes, real books, the old-fashioned kind that were printed on paper and bound together between leather or board covers. They're still available in some libraries, Earthside, and I've read a lot of them. As a matter of fact, I own quite a collection myself. It's a peculiar hobby, but I enjoy it much more than telolearning or going to the sensorals.

Consequently I admit I'm a little bit maladjusted, according to those same psychiatric texts I mentioned. That's the only possible explanation of why I enjoy reading, and why I pick up so many odd items of useless information.

This business about straitjackets and restraint, for example. All I ever got out of it was a peculiar feeling whenever we hit grav. on a Rec. Flight.

I got it again, now, as Penner yelled, "Act alert, Dale — put down that toy and strap up!"

I dropped my book and went over to the Sighter Post. Already I could feel the preliminary pull despite the neutralizer's efforts. I strapped up and hung there in my cocoon, hung there in my straitjacket.

*Dale liked to read, so he brought along books — nice, safe books.*

There I was, nicely in restraint, in our own little private asylum — Scout #3890–R, two months out of Home Port 19/1, and now approaching 68/5 planet for Reconnaissance.

Before looking out of the Sighter, I took another glance at my fellow inmates. Penner, Acting Chief, Temp., was strapped in at Mechontrol; all I could see of him was the broad back, the bullet head bent in monomaniac concentration. Swanson, Astrog., 2nd Class, hung at his side, cakeknife nose in profile over the Obsetape. Little Morse, Tech., was stationed at my left and old Levy, Eng., hung to my right. All present and accounted for: Penner, Swanson, Morse, Levy — and myself, George Dale, Constant Reader and erstwhile Service Observer, hanging in his straitjacket after two months in a floating madhouse.

Two months of anything is a long time. Two months of Rec. Flight is an eternity. Being cooped up with four other men in a single compartment for that length of time is no picnic, and our straitjackets seemed singularly appropriate.

Not that any of us were actually psycho; all of us had a long record of similar missions, and we had managed to survive. But the sheer monotony had worn us down.

I suppose that's why Service gave us the extra seven pounds per man — Lux. Allotment, it was called. But the so-called luxuries turn out to be necessities after all. Swanson usually put his poundage into solid food; candy, and the like. Chocolate capsules kept him sane. Morse and Levy went in for games — cards, dice, superchess and the necessary boards. Penner, amazingly enough, did sketching on pads of oldfashioned paper. And I had this habit of my own — I always managed to bring three or four books within the weight limit.

I still think my choice was the best; candy-munching, freehand sketching and the delights of dicing and superchessmanship palled quickly enough on my four companions. But the books kept me interested. I had a peculiar background — learned to read as a child rather than as an adult — and I guess that's why I derived such queer satisfaction from my hobby.

Naturally, the others laughed at me. Naturally, we got on each other's nerves, quarreled and fretted and flared up. But now, resting quietly in our straitjackets as we entered grav., a measure of sanity returned. With it came anticipation and expectation.

We were approaching 68/5 planet.

New worlds to conquer? Not exactly. It *was* a new world, and therein lay the expectation. But we weren't out to conquer; we

on Rec. Flight merely observed and recorded. Or, rather, our instruments recorded.

At the moment we slid in on Mechontrol, about five hundred miles above the surface. 68/5 was small, cloud-wreathed; it had atmosphere apparently, as did its companions. Now we were moving closer and we peered through the Sighters at a dull, flat surface that seemed to be rushing toward us at accelerating speed.

"Pretty old," little Morse grunted. "No mountains, and no water, either — dried up, I guess."

"No life." This from old Levy. "That's a relief." Levy was what the books would have called a misanthrope. Although his mis wasn't confined to anthropes. He seemed to have a congenital aversion to everything that wasn't strictly mechanical — why he didn't stick to robotics, I'll never know.

We came down faster. Fifty miles, forty, thirty. I saw Swanson making arrangements to drop the roboship. Penner gave the signal as he righted us above the surface. The roboship glided away, guided by Swanson at the Obsetape. It drifted down, down, down. We followed slowly, dropping below the cloud barrier and following it closely.

"Hit!" snapped Swanson. "Right on the button." We waited while the roboship did its job. It was our star reporter, our roving photographer, our official meteorologist, our staff geologist, our expert in anthropology and mineralogy, our trusted guide and — most important, on many occasions — our stalking-horse.

If there was life present on a planet, the landing of the roboship generally brought it forth. If there was death on a planet, the roboship found it for us. And always, it recorded. It was, in a way, a complete expedition encapsulated, a non-human functional without the human capability of error or terror.

Now it went into action, cruising over the surface, directed by Swanson's delicate manipulation of the Obsetape unit controls. We waited patiently, then impatiently. An hour passed, two hours.

"Bring it in!" Penner ordered. Swanson moved his fingers and the roboship returned.

Penner snapped on the Temporary Balance. "Everybody unstrap," he said. "Let's take a look!"

We went down the ramp to the lower deck and Swanson opened the roboship. The photos were ready, the tapes were spooled. We were busy with findings for another hour. At the end of that time we had all the preliminary data necessary on 68/5 planet.

Oxygen content high. Gravity similar to Earthside — as seemed constant in this particular sector

and system. No detectable life-forms. But life had existed here, once, and life of a high order. The photos proved that. City ruins galore.

And the planet was old. No doubt about that. Morse had been right; mountains were worn away to dust, and the dust did not support vegetable life. Strange that the oxygen content was still so high. I'd have supposed that carbonization —

"Let's snap out," Penner said. "We don't need Temporary Balance or straps according to the gravity reading. Might as well go in for a landing right away. The day-cycle here is 20.1 hours — computer gives us a good 5 hours to go, right now. So we can all take a look around."

We filed back upstairs and Swanson brought us in.

It was only a dead planet, a desert of dust without trees or grass or water; a flat, slate-colored surface where everything was the same, same, same. But it was solid; you could put your feet down on it, you could walk across the sand for miles and feel the air flow against your face.

And there were ruins to explore. That might be interesting. At least, it was a change.

I could feel the tension and excitement mount; it was as palpable as the momentary shock and shudder of landing. We crowded around the lock, struggling out of our suits and putting on the light plastikoids, buckling on the gear and weapons as prescribed by regulation. Morse handed us our equipment and we zipped and strapped and adjusted in a frenzy of impatience. Even Penner was eager, but he remembered to grab his sketch-pad before the lock was opened.

Normally, I suppose he would have insisted on maintaining a watch on board, but in the absence of life it didn't really matter. And after two months, everybody wanted out.

The lock opened. The ladder went down. We inhaled, deeply, turned our faces to the warmth of the distant orange sun.

"Single file — keep together!" Penner cautioned.

It's the last day of school, and dismissal is sounded, and the boys rush out onto the playground. So the teacher warns, "Single file — keep together!" and what happens?

Just what happened now. In a moment we were racing across the soft sand, grinning and tossing handfuls of the fine grains high into the clean, dry air. We ran across the brand new world on our brand new legs.

We moved in the direction we couldn't help thinking of as west — because the orange sun hung there and we turned to the sun as naturally as flowers recently

transplanted from a hothouse.

We moved buoyantly and joyfully and freely, for this was vacation and picnic and release from the asylum all in one. The smiles on the faces of my companions bespoke euphoria. It was all good: the gritty, sliding sand under our feet, the pumping of legs in long strides, the grinding ball-and-socket action of the hips, the swinging of arms, the rise and fall of the chest, the lungs greedily gasping in and squandering recklessly, the eye seeing far, far away. Yes, it was good to be here, good to be alive, good to be free.

Once again we measured minutes in terms of movements, rather than abstract units of time-passage we must endure. Once again we consciously heightened our awareness of existence, rather than dulled it to make life bearable.

It seemed to me that I'd never felt so completely alive, but I was wrong. I was wrong, because I didn't notice the blackout.

None of us were aware of it: even now, I can't begin to comprehend it. I don't know what happened. It was just that — blackout.

Before it happened, we marched toward the sun — Penner, Swanson and Morse a little in the lead, Levy and I a pace or two behind, all of us trudging up a slight incline in the sand.

And then, without any seeming transition at all, we were marching in darkness — Penner, Swanson, Morse, Levy and I in a solid group, trudging down into a valley.

"What happened?"

"Eclipse?"

"Where's the sun?"

"Where are we?"

"How long we been walking? I feel like I passed out!"

We halted and exchanged comments.

"Something wrong here. We're going back. Get out the beamers." Penner issued orders swiftly.

We broke out the beamers, adjusted the slow-strobes, put pathways of light before us. There was nothing to see but slaty sand. Only Swanson's bearings with the scope guided us in retracing our steps. We moved swiftly through the pall of a purple night. A mist shrouded the stars; a mist mantled our memories.

That's when we compared notes, realized for the first time that the phenomenon had occurred to all of us simultaneously. Gas, shock, temporary dislocation — we argued about the cause for hours, and all the while we marched on the alert, up hummocks and down into little valleys between the dunes.

And we were tired. Unused muscles strained, hearts pumped, feet blistered. And still we marched. I was hungry and thirsty; more than that, I was puzzled and a

little bit afraid. I didn't understand just what had happened — how could we, all of us, go on walking that way while we were out on our feet? How could we lose almost four hours? And what did it mean?

At the moment we were in no danger of being lost, and it was more and more obvious that this planet contained no life, hostile or otherwise. But why the blackout? It puzzled me, puzzled all of us.

Swanson took the lead. His beadlike profile loomed on a rise in my beamer's path. He turned and yelled, "I can see the ship now!"

We toiled up the slope and joined him. Yes, the ship was there, snug and safe and secure, and the adventure was over.

Or — was it?

"Look down there!" Levy swivelled his beamer to the left. "We must have missed it on the way out."

Five rays played, pooled, pointed in a single beam. Five rays found, focused and flooded upon the objects rising from the sand. And then we were all running together toward the ruins.

Just before we reached them, Penner yelled, "Stop!"

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing — maybe. Then again, you never know. That blackout bothers me." Penner put his hand on my shoulder. "Look, Dale, I want you and Morse to go back to the ship and wait. The three of us will take a trip through the ruins. But I want at least two men on ship at all times, in case there's any trouble. Go ahead, now — we won't move until we see you're on board. Flash us a signal to let us know everything's all right when you get there."

Morse and I trudged off.

"Just my luck." Little Morse grumbled under his breath and waved his beamer in disgust. "Run around for hours in the sand and then when we finally hit something it's back to the ship. Huh!"

"He's right, though," I answered. "Got to be careful. And besides, we can eat and take our shoes off."

"But I want to see those ruins. I promised my girl some souvenirs —"

"Tomorrow we'll probably get our turn," I reminded him. He shrugged and plodded on. We reached the ship, boarded, and took a quick look around. All clear.

Morse went over to the panel and pushed the blinker. Then we sat down next to the Sighter and stared out. All we could see at this distance was a purple blur, through which three beams moved and wavered.

I opened foodcaps and we swallowed, still straining to see. The lights moved separately at

first, then coalesced into a single unit.

"Must have found something," Morse speculated. "Wonder what?"

"We'll find out soon enough," I predicted.

But they didn't come back, and they didn't come back — we sat for hours, waiting.

Finally the beams moved our way. We were waiting as Penner, Swanson and Levy boarded. An excited babble wavered into words and the words became sentences.

"Never saw anything like them —"

"Smaller than dwarfs; couldn't be, but I'd swear they were human."

"Gets me is the way they disappeared, just like somebody had scooped them all up at once."

"Wasn't their city, I'm sure of that. First of all, it was ages old, and secondly it wasn't built to their size-scale at all —"

"Think we just imagined the whole thing? That blackout was peculiar enough, and then, seeing them this way —"

I raised my voice. "What's all this about? What did you find?"

The answer was more babbling in unison, until Penner signalled for silence.

"See what you make of this, Dale," he said. He pulled out his sketch-pad and went to work, swiftly. As he worked, he talked. Story and sketches emerged almost simultaneously.

He passed the first drawing to me.

"Ruins," he said. "Ruins of a city. All we really saw were the rooftops, but they're enough to give you some idea of the probable size of the place. You'll note everything was solid stone. Plenty of broad, flat surfaces. Here's a sketch of me standing between two rooftops. Probably a street in between, at one time. What do you make of it?"

I studied his sketch; it was crude, but graphically explicit. "They must have been humanoid," I said. "If we accept functionalism in architectural representation —"

"Never mind the book words," Penner interrupted. "Look at the width of that street. Would you say that the inhabitants were large or small?"

"Large, of course." I looked at the sketch again. "Must have been much taller than we are, perhaps seven or eight feet if they worked according to our proportions. Of course, that's just a rough guess."

"Good enough. And we geigered the stones a bit. Levy, here, places them at fourteen thousand years."

"The very least," Levy broke in. "Possibly older than that."

Penner was sketching again. He passed the second drawing over to me. "Here's what we found

wandering around in the ruins," he told me. "I've shown two of them standing next to me, but there must have been hundreds."

I looked. There stood Penner, and — at his feet — two tiny manlike beings.

"You actually saw these things?"

"Of course. We all did, there's no doubt about it. One minute we were climbing around among the stones, and then they appeared. Just like that, out of nowhere, you might say. And not one or two, but hundreds of them." He turned. "Isn't that right, Swanson?"

"Correct."

I gazed at the sketch again. Penner had an eye for detail. I was particularly impressed with the way the creatures were dressed.

"These look like ancient earth-garments," I said. "They're wearing little armored breastplates, and helmets. And they carry spears."

"That's exactly how they looked," Levy corroborated. "Some of them had those — what were they called? — bows and arrows."

Penner eyed me. "You've got a theory, Dale?"

"No, but I'm getting one. These little thing never built the city. They don't live in the ruins, now. They couldn't possibly wear earth-garments like these. They appeared suddenly, you say, and disappeared just as suddenly."

"Sounds silly, the way you sum it up," Penner admitted.

"Yes. Unless you accept one over-all theory."

"And that is —?"

"That they don't exist! They never existed at all, except in your imagination."

"But we all saw them. Saw them, and heard them!"

"We all went through a black-out together, a few hours ago," I reminded him. "And I'm beginning to think that ties in, somehow. Suppose 68/5 isn't uninhabited. Suppose it does contain life."

"That's out of the question!" Swanson interrupted. "The roboship tapes are infallible. Any sign of existence would have been detected and recorded. You know that."

"Yet suppose there were no signs," I answered. "Suppose we're dealing with an intangible intelligence —"

"Absurd!" This from Penner.

"No more absurd than the story you've told me. Suppose the intelligence can control our minds. It blacked us out and planted hypnotic suggestion. A little while later you saw little men —"

"No. It doesn't add up," Levy insisted. "There's a flaw." He pointed at the second sketch. "How would your intelligence know about earth-garments such

as these? I'm sure none of us were aware of such things. You're the bookworm around here —"

"Bookworm!" I paused. "Wait a minute. You say these creatures talked to you?"

"That's right," Penner answered.

"Do you remember any of the words?"

"I think so. They had little shrill voices and they were shouting to each other. Sounded something like *Hekinah degul* and *Langro dehul san*."

"One of them pointed at you and said *Hurgo* over and over," Swanson reminded him.

"*Hurgo*," I repeated. "Wait a minute." I walked over to my shelf and pulled down one of my books. "Look at this," I said. "No pictures in this edition, of course, but read this page."

Penner read slowly as the others crowded around. He raised his head, scowled. "Sounds like our creatures," he said. "What is this?"

I turned to the frontispiece and read. "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS, by Jonathan Swift. Published, 1727."

"No!" said Penner.

I shrugged. "It's all in the book," I told him. "Descriptions, words, phrases. Some intelligent force out there tried to read our minds and — I think — failed. So it read the book, instead, and reproduced a part of it."

"But what possible force could exist? And how could it read the book? And why did it reproduce the —" Penner halted, groping for the word which I supplied.

"Lilliputians."

"All right, why did it reproduce Lilliputians?"

I didn't know the answers. I couldn't even guess. All I had was a feeling, which I expressed in one short sentence. "Let's get out of here."

Penner shook his head. "We can't. You know that. We've stumbled across something without precedent, and it's our job to investigate it fully. Who knows what we might learn? I say we get some rest and go back tomorrow."

There was a mumble of agreement. I had nothing more to say, so I kept quiet. Swanson and Morse and Levy sought their bunks. I started across to mine, when Penner tapped me on the shoulder.

"By the way, Dale, would you mind letting me have that book of yours? I want to read up on those creatures — might come in handy tomorrow."

I gave him the book and he went forward. Then I lay down and prepared to sleep. Before closing my eyes I took a last look out of the nearest Sighter. The planet was dark and dead. There was nothing out there — nothing but sand and ruins and loneliness.

And something that made up Lilliputians, something that read in order to learn, and learned in order to plan, and planned in order to act —

I didn't get much sleep that night.

THE sun was lemon-colored the next morning when Swanson roused us.

"Come on," he said. "Penner says we're going out again. Two of us will stay on ship, but we'll take turns. Morse, you and Dale can get ready."

"Orders?" I asked.

"No. I don't think so. It's just that it's really your turn to see the ruins."

I faced him. "I don't want to see the ruins. And my advice is that we all stay on ship and blast off, right now."

"What's the trouble?" Penner loomed up behind Swanson.

"He doesn't want to go out," Swanson said. "Thinks we ought to leave." He smiled at Penner, and his smile said, "Coward".

Penner grinned at me and his grin said, "Psycho."

I didn't let my face talk for me. This was serious. "Look, now," I began. "I've been awake most of the night, thinking. And I've got a hunch."

"Let's hear it." Penner was courteous enough, but over his shoulder he said, "Meanwhile, you men get into your suits."

"This intelligence we talked about last night — we all agreed it must exist. But it can't be measured or located."

"That's what we're going to try to do this morning," Penner said.

"I advise against it."

"Go on."

"Let's think about intelligence for a moment. Ever try to define it? Pretty difficult thing to do. We all know there are hundreds of worlds that don't contain intelligence but do contain life. New worlds and old worlds alike have a complete existence and cycle independent of conscious intelligence."

"What's this, a book-lecture?" asked Morse.

"No, just my own ideas. And one of my ideas is that what we call intelligence is a random element, arising spontaneously under certain conditions just as life itself does. It isn't necessary for the existence of a world — it's extraneous, it's a parasite, an alien growth. Usually it uses brain-cells as a host. But suppose it could evolve to the point where it isn't limited to brain-cells?"

"All right, then what?" Penner snapped.

"Suppose, when life dies on a planet, intelligence finds a means of survival? Suppose it adapts itself to something other than the tissue of the cortex? Suppose the highest point of evolution is reached — in

which the planet itself, as host, becomes the seat of intelligence?"

"Mean to say that 68/5 can think?"

"It's worth considering. Remember, when intelligence enters brain-calls it identifies itself with its host, and tries in every way to help its host survive. Suppose it enters, finally, into the planet — when life dies out — and tries to help the planet survive?"

"Thinking planets! Now I've heard everything!" This from Swanson. "Dale, you read too many books."

"Perhaps. But consider what's happened. We can't locate any life-form here. Nevertheless, we black out. And something creates, out of reading and imagination, a duplicate of GULLIVER'S TRAVELS. Think in terms of a combined number of intelligences, fused into a single unit housed in the body of this world itself. Think of its potential power, and then think of its motives. We're outsiders, we may be hostile, we must be controlled or destroyed. And that's what the planet is trying to do. It can't read our minds, but it can read my books. And its combined force is enough to materialize imaginative concepts in an effort to destroy us. First came Lilliputians with bows and arrows and tiny spears. The intelligence realized these would not be effective, so it may try something else. Something like —"

Penner cut me off with a gesture. "All right, Dale. You don't have to come with us if you don't want to." It was like a slap in the face. I stared around the circle. The men had their suits on. Nobody looked at me.

Then, surprisingly enough, Levy spoke up. "Maybe he's right," he said. "Somebody else has to stay behind, too. Think I'll keep Dale company here."

I smiled at him. He came over, unfastening his suit. The others didn't say anything. They filed over to the stairs.

"We'll watch you through the Sighters," Levy said. Penner nodded, disappeared with the others.

MINUTES later we caught sight of them toiling up the sun-baked slope of the ridge leading toward the ruins. In the clear light now the ruins were partially visible. Even though only rooftops were clear of sand, they looked gigantic and imposing. An ancient race had dwelt here. And now a new race had come. That was the way life went. Or death —

"What are you worrying about?" Levy asked. "Stop squirming."

"I don't like it," I said. "Something's going to happen. You believed me too or you wouldn't have stayed."

"Penner's a fool," Levy said. "You know, I used to read a few books myself, once upon a time."

"Once upon a time!" I stood up. "I forgot!"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm looking for my other two books," I said. "I should have thought of *that*."

"Thought of what?" Levy talked to me, but he was watching the others, outside, through the Sighter.

"If it read one book, it can read the others," I told him. "Better get rid of them right away, play it safe."

"What are the other two books?" Levy asked the question, but I never answered him. Because his voice changed, cracked, and he said, "*Dale, come here, hurry!*"

I stared through the Sighter. I adjusted the control and it was like a closeup; I could see Penner and Swanson and Morse as if they were standing beside me. They had just reached the top of the ridge, and the ruined stones of the cyclopean city rose before them. *Cyclopean.*

The word came, the concept came, and then the reality. The first giant towered up from behind the rocks. He was thirty feet tall and his single eye was a burning beacon.

They saw him and turned to

flee. Penner tugged at his waist, trying to draw his tube and fire. But there wasn't time now, for the giants were all around them — the one-eyed monsters out of myth.

The giants laughed, and their laughter shook the earth, and they scooped great rocks up from the ruins and hurled them at the men, crushing them. And then they lumbered over to the crushed forms and began to feast, their talons rending and tearing the bodies as I now tore the pages from the book I was holding.

"Cyclops," Levy whispered. "*The Odyssey*, isn't it?" The torn fragments of the second book fell from my fingers as I turned away.

Levy was already working at the panels. "Only two of us," he said. "But we can make it. Take-off's automatic once we blast. I'm pretty sure we can make it, aren't you, Dale?"

"Yes," I said, but I didn't really care.

The floor was beginning to vibrate. In just a minute, now, we'd blast.

"Come on, Dale, strap up! I'll handle the board. You know what to do."

I knew what to do.

Levy's face twitched. "What's the matter now? Is it the third book? Are you going to get rid of the third book?"

"No need to. The third one's harmless," I said. "Here, I'll show you."

"What is it?" he asked.

I stepped over to the Sighter for the last time and he followed me. I adjusted for closeup very carefully.

"Look," I said.

We stared out across the barren plain, the plain which no longer held life because it had *become* life for this planet.

The Cyclops had disappeared, and what was left of Penner and Swanson and Morse lay undisturbed in the dreaming ruins under an orange sun.

*Somewhere, somehow, the reader turned a page —*

"The third book," I whispered. "Watch."

It scampered out from behind one of the stones, moving swiftly on tiny legs. The Sighter brought it so close that I could see the very hairs of its whiskers, note the design of its checkered waistcoat, read the numerals on the watch it took out of the waistcoat pocket. Before I turned away, I almost fancied I could read its lips.

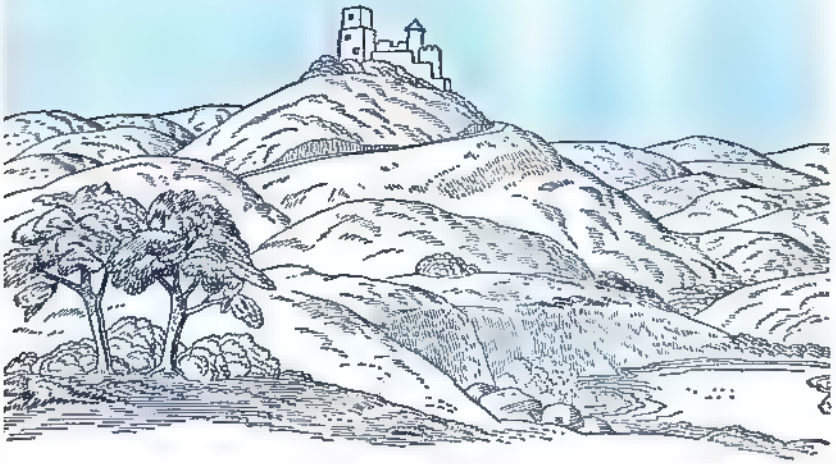
That wasn't necessary, of course, because I knew what it was saying.

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" it murmured.

Mincing daintily on thin legs, the White Rabbit scampered among the bodies as we blasted off.

# THE WORLD WELL LOST

## by Theodore Sturgeon



ALL THE WORLD knew them as loverbirds, though they were certainly not birds, but humans. Well, say humanoids. Featherless bipeds. Their stay on earth was brief, a nine-day wonder. Any wonder that lasts nine days on an earth of orgasmic trideo shows; time-freezing pills; synapse-inverter fields which make it possible for a man to turn a sunset to perfumes, a masochist to a fur-feeler; and a thousand other euphorics — why, on such an earth, a nine-day wonder is a wonder indeed.

Like a sudden bloom across the face of the world came the peculiar magic of the loverbirds. There were loverbird songs and loverbird trinkets, loverbird hats and pins, bangles and baubles, coins and quaffs and tidbits. For there was that about the loverbirds which made a deep enchantment. No one can be told about a loverbird and feel this curious delight. Many are immune even to

**Beautiful, graceful, and so in love that Terrans called them loverbirds. But Dirbanus called them fugitives and asked for — *ordered* — their return.**

a solidograph. But watch loverbirds, only for a moment, and see what happens. It's the feeling you had when you were twelve, and summer-drenched, and you kissed a girl for the very first time and knew a breathlessness you were sure could never happen again. And indeed it never could — unless you watched loverbirds. Then you are spellbound for four quiet seconds, and suddenly your very heart twists, and incredulous tears sting and stay; and the very first move you make afterward, you make on tiptoe, and your first word is a whisper.

This magic came over very well on trideo, and everyone had trideo; so for a brief while the earth was enchanted.

There were only two loverbirds. They came down out of the sky in a single brassy flash, and stepped out of their ship, hand in hand. Their eyes were full of wonder, each at the other, and together at the world. They seemed frozen in a full-to-bursting moment of discovery; they made way for one another gravely and with courtesy, they looked about them and in the very looking gave each other gifts — the color of the sky, the taste of the air, the pressures of things growing and meeting and changing. They never spoke. They simply *were* together. To watch them was to know of their awestruck mounting of staircases of bird notes, of how each knew the warmth of the other as their flesh supped silently on sunlight.

They stepped from their ship, and the tall one threw a yellow powder back to it. The ship fell in upon itself and became a pile of rubble, which collapsed into a pile of gleaming sand, which slumped compactly down to dust and then to an airblown emulsion so fine that Brownian movement itself hammered it up and out and away. Anyone could see that they intended to stay. Anyone could know by simply watching them that next to their wondrous delight in each other came their delighted wonder at earth itself, everything and everybody about it.

Now, if terrestrial culture were a pyramid, at the apex (where the power is) would sit a blind man, for so constituted are we that only by blinding ourselves, bit by bit, may we rise above our fellows. The man at the apex has an immense preoccupation with the welfare of the whole, because he regards it as the source and structure of his elevation, which it is, and as an extension of himself, which it is not. It was such a man who, in the face of immeasurable evidence, chose to find a defense against loverbirds, and fed the matrices and coordinates of the loverbird image into the most marvelous calculator that had ever been built.

The machine sucked in symbols and raced them about, compared

and waited and matched and sat still while its bulging memory, cell by cell, was silent, was silent — and suddenly, in a far corner, resonated. It grasped this resonance in forceps made of mathematics, snatched it out (translating furiously as it snatched) and put out a fevered tongue of paper on which was typed:

DIRBANU

Now this utterly changed the complexion of things. For earth ships had ranged the cosmos far and wide, with few hindrances. Of these hindrances, all could be understood but one, and that one was Dirbanu, a transgalactic planet which shrouded itself in impenetrable fields of force whenever an earthship approached. There were other worlds which could do this, but in each case the crews knew why it was done. Dirbanu, upon discovery, had prohibited landings from the very first until an ambassador could be sent to Terra. In due time one did arrive (so reported the calculator, which was the only entity that remembered the episode) and it was obvious that Earth and Dirbanu had much in common. The ambassador, however, showed a most uncommon disdain of Earth and all its works, curled his lip and went wordlessly home, and ever since then Dirbanu had locked itself tight away from the questing Terrans.

Dirbanu thereby became of value, and fair game, but we could do nothing to ripple the bland face of her defenses. As this impregnability repeatedly proved itself, Dirbanu evolved in our group mind through the usual stages of being: the Curiosity, the Mystery, the Challenge, the Enemy, the Enemy, the Enemy, the Mystery, the Curiosity, and finally That-which-is-too-far-away-to-bother-with, or the Forgotten.

And suddenly, after all this time, Earth had two genuine natives of Dirbanu aboard, entrancing the populace and giving no information. This intolerable circumstance began to make itself felt throughout the world — but slowly, for this time the blind men's din was cushioned and soaked by the magic of the loverbirds. It might have taken a very long time to convince the people of the menace in their midst had there not been a truly startling development:

A direct message was received from Dirbanu.

The collective impact of loverbird material emanating from transmitters on Earth had attracted the attention of Dirbanu, which promptly informed us that the loverbirds were indeed their nationals, that in addition they were fugitives, that Dirbanu would take it ill if Earth should regard itself as a sanctuary for the

criminals of Dirbanu but would, on the other hand, find it in its heart to be very pleased if Earth saw fit to return them.

So from the depths of its enchantment, Terra was able to calculate a course of action. Here at last was an opportunity to consort with Dirbanu on a friendly basis — great Dirbanu which, since it had force fields which Earth could not duplicate, must of necessity have many other things Earth could use; mighty Dirbanu before whom we could kneel in supplication (with purely-for-defense bombs hidden in our pockets) with lowered heads (making invisible the knife in our teeth) and ask for crumbs from their table (in order to extrapolate the location of their kitchens).

Thus the loverbird episode became another item in the weary procession of proofs that Terra's most reasonable intolerance can conquer practically anything, even magic.

Especially magic.

So it was that the loverbirds were arrested, that the *Starmite* 439 was fitted out as a prison ship, that a most carefully screened crew was chosen for her, and that she struck starward with the cargo that would gain us a world.

* * *

Two men were the crew — a colorful little rooster of a man and a great dun bull of a man. They were, respectively, Rootes, who was Captain and staff, and Grunty, who was midship and inboard corps. Rootes was cocky, springy, white and crisp. His hair was auburn and so were his eyes, and the eyes were hard. Grunty was a shambler with big gentle hands and heavy shoulders half as wide as Rootes was high. He should have worn a cowl and rope-belted habit. He should, perhaps, have worn a burnoose. He did neither, but the effect was there. Known only to him was the fact that words and pictures, concepts and comparisons were an endless swirling blizzard inside him. Known only to him and Rootes was the fact that he had books, and books, and books, and Rootes did not care if he had or not. Grunty he had been called since he first learned to talk, and Grunty was name enough for him. For the words in his head would not leave him except one or two at a time, with long moments between. So he had learned to condense his verbal messages to breathy grunts, and when they wouldn't condense, he said nothing.

They were primitives, both of them, which is to say that they were doers, while Modern Man is a thinker and/or a feeler. The thinkers compose new variations and permutations of euphoria, and the feelers repay the thinkers

by responding to their inventions. The ships had no place for Modern Man, and Modern Man had only the most casual use for the ships.

Doers can cooperate like cam and pushrod, like ratchet and pawl, and such linkage creates a powerful bond. But Rootes and Grunty were unique among crews in that these machine parts were not interchangeable. Any good captain can command any good crew, surroundings being equivalent. But Rootes would not and could not ship out with anyone but Grunty, and Grunty was just that dependent. Grunty understood this bond, and the fact that the only way it could conceivably be broken would be to explain it to Rootes. Rootes did not understand it because it never occurred to him to try, and had he tried, he would have failed, since he was inherently non-equipped for the task. Grunty knew that their unique bond was, for him, a survival matter. Rootes did not know this, and would have rejected the idea with violence.

So Rootes regarded Grunty with tolerance and a modified amusement. The modification was an inarticulate realization of Grunty's complete dependability. Grunty regarded Rootes with . . . well, with the ceaseless, silent flurry of words in his mind.

There was, beside the harmony of functions and the other link, understood only by Grunty, a third adjunct to their phenomenal efficiency as a crew. It was organic, and it had to do with the stellar drive.

Reaction engines were long forgotten. The so-called "warp" drive was used only experimentally and on certain crash-priority war-craft where operating costs were not a factor. The *Starmite* 439 was, like most interstellar craft, powered by an RS plant. Like the transistor, the Referential Stasis generator is extremely simple to construct and very difficult indeed to explain. Its mathematics approaches mysticism and its theory contains certain impossibilities which are ignored in practice. Its effect is to shift the area of stasis of the ship and everything in it from one point of reference to another. For example, the ship at rest on the Earth's surface is in stasis in reference to the ground on which it rests. Throwing the ship into stasis in reference to the center of the earth gives it instantly an effective speed equal to the surface velocity of the planet around its core — some one thousand miles per hour. Stasis referential to the sun moves the Earth out from under the ship at the Earth's orbital velocity. GH stasis "moves" the ship at the angular velocity of the sun about the Galactic Hub. The galactic drift can be used, as can any simple or complex mass center in this ex-

panding universe. There are resultants and there are multipliers, and effective velocities can be enormous. Yet the ship is constantly in stasis, so that there is never an inertia factor.

The one inconvenience of the RS drive is that shifts from one referent to another invariably black the crew out, for psychoneural reasons. The blackout period varies slightly between individuals, from one to two and a half hours. But some anomaly in Grunty's gigantic frame kept his blackout periods down to thirty or forty minutes, while Rootes was always out for two hours or more. There was that about Grunty which made moments of isolation a vital necessity, for a man must occasionally be himself, which in anyone's company Grunty was not. But after stasis shifts Grunty had an hour or so to himself while his commander lay numbly spread-eagled on the blackout couch, and he spent these in communions of his own devising. Sometimes this meant only a good book.

This, then, was the crew picked to man the prison ship. It had been together longer than any other crew in the Space Service. Its record showed a metrical efficiency and a resistance to physical and psychic debilitations previously unheard of in a trade where close confinement on long voyages had come to be regarded as hazards. In space, shift followed shift uneventfully, and planetfall was made on schedule and without incident. In port Rootes would roar off to the fleshpots, in which he would wallow noisily until an hour before takeoff, while Grunty found, first, the business office, and next, a bookstore.

They were pleased to be chosen for the Dirbanu trip. Rootes felt no remorse at taking away Earth's new delight, since he was one of the very few who was immune to it. ("Pretty," he said at his first encounter.) Grunty simply grunted, but then, so did everyone else. Rootes did not notice, and Grunty did not remark upon the obvious fact that though the loverbirds' expression of awestruck wonderment in each other's presence had, if anything, intensified, their extreme pleasure in Earth and the things of Earth had vanished. They were locked, securely but comfortably, in the after cabin behind a new transparent door, so that their every move could be watched from the main cabin and control console They sat close, with their arms about one another, and though their radiant joy in the contact never lessened, it was a shadowed pleasure, a lachrymose beauty like the wrenching music of the wailing wall.

THE RS drive laid its hand on the moon and they vaulted

away. Grunty came up from blackout to find it very quiet. The lover birds lay still in each other's arms, looking very human except for the high joining of their closed eyelids, which nictated upward rather than downward like a Terran's. Rootes sprawled limply on the other couch, and Grunty nodded at the sight. He deeply appreciated the silence, since Rootes had filled the small cabin with earthy chatter about his conquests in port, detail by hairy detail, for two solid hours preceding their departure. It was a routine which Grunty found particularly wearing, partly for its content, which interested him not at all, but mostly for its inevitability. Grunty had long ago noted that these recitations, for all their detail, carried the tones of thirst rather than of satiety. He had his own conclusions about it, and, characteristically, kept them to himself. But inside, his spinning gusts of words could shape themselves well to it, and they did. "And man, she moaned!" Rootes would chant. "And take money? She *gave* me money. And what did I do with it? Why, I bought up some more of the same." *And what you could buy with a shekel's worth of tenderness, my prince!* his silent words sang. ". . . across the floor and around the rug until, by damn, I thought we're about to climb the wall. Loaded, Grunty-boy, I tell you, I was loaded!" *Poor little one* ran the hushed susurrus, *thy poverty is as great as thy joy and a tenth as great as thine empty noise.* One of Grunty's greatest pleasures was taken in the fact that this kind of chuntering was limited to the first day out, with barely another word on the varied theme until the next departure, no matter how many months away that might be. *Squeak to me of love, dear mouse,* his words would chuckle. *Stand up on your cheese and nibble away at your dream.* Then, wearily, *But oh, this treasure I carry is too heavy a burden, in all its fullness, to be so tugged at by your clattering vacuum!*

Grunty left the couch and went to the controls. The preset courses checked against the indicators. He logged them and fixed the finder control to locate a certain mass-nexus in the Crab Nebula. It would chime when it was ready. He set the switch for final closing by the push-button beside his couch, and went aft to wait.

He stood watching the lover-birds because there was nothing else for him to do.

They lay quite still, but love so permeated them that their very poses expressed it. Their lax bodies yearned each to each, and the tall one's hand seemed to stream toward the fingers of his beloved, and then back again, like the riven tatters of a torn fabric straining toward oneness again. And as their mood was a sadness

too, so their pose, each and both, together and singly expressed it, and singly each through the other silently spoke of the loss they had suffered, and how it ensured greater losses to come. Slowly the picture suffused Grunty's thinking, and his words picked and pieced and smoothed it down, and murmured finally, *Brush away the dusting of sadness from the future, bright ones. You've sadness enough for now. Grief should live only after it is truly born, and not before.*

His words sang,

*Come fill the cup and in the fire of spring*
*Your winter garment of repentance fling.*
*The bird of time has but a little way*
*To flutter — and the bird is on the wing.*

and added *Omar Khayyam, born circa 1073,* for this, too, was one of the words' functions.

And then he stiffened in horror; his great hands came up convulsively and clawed the imprisoning glass . . .

They were smiling at him.

They were smiling, and on their faces and on and about their bodies there was no sadness.

They had *heard* him!

He glanced convulsively around at the Captain's unconscious form, then back to the loverbirds.

That they should recover so swiftly from blackout was, to say the least, an intrusion; for his moments of aloneness were precious and more than precious to Grunty, and would be useless to him under the scrutiny of those jewelled eyes. But that was a minor matter compared to this other thing, this terrible fact that they *heard.*

Telepathic races were not common, but they did exist. And what he was now experiencing was what invariably happened when humans encountered one. He could only send; the loverbirds could only receive. And they *must not* receive him! No one must. No one must know what he was, what he thought. If anyone did, it would be a disaster beyond bearing. It would mean no more flights with Rootes. Which, of course, meant no flights with anyone. And how could he live — where could he go?

He turned back to the loverbirds. His lips were white and drawn back in a snarl of panic and fury. For a blood-thick moment he held their eyes. They drew closer to one another, and together sent him a radiant, anxious, friendly look that made him grind his teeth.

Then, at the console, the finder chimed

Grunty turned slowly from the transparent door and went to his couch. He lay down and poised his thumb over the push-button.

He *hated* the loverbirds, and there was no joy in him. He pressed the button, the ship slid

into a new stasis, and he blacked out.

* * *

The time passed.

"Grunty!"

"?"

"You feed them this shift?"

"Nuh."

"Last shift?"

"Nuh."

"What the hell's the matter with you, y'big dumb bastich? What you expect them to live on?"

Grunty sent a look of roiling hatred aft. "Love," he said.

"Feed 'em," snapped Rootes.

Wordlessly Grunty went about preparing a meal for the prisoners. Rootes stood in the middle of the cabin, his hard small fists on his hips, his gleaming auburn head tilted to one side, and watched every move. "I didn't used to have to tell you anything," he growled, half pugnaciously, half worriedly. "You sick?"

Grunty shook his head. He twisted the tops of two cans and set them aside to heat themselves, and took down the water suckers.

"You got it in for these honeymooners or something?"

Grunty averted his face.

"We get them to Dirbanu alive and healthy, hear me? They get sick, you get sick, by God. I'll see to that. Don't give me trouble, Grunty. I'll take it out on you. I never whipped you yet, but I will."

Grunty carried the tray aft. "You hear me?" Rootes yelled.

Grunty nodded without looking at him. He touched the control and a small communication window slid open in the glass wall. He slid the tray through. The taller loverbird stepped forward and took it eagerly, gracefully, and gave him a dazzling smile of thanks. Grunty growled low in his throat like a carnivore. The loverbird carried the food back to the couch and they began to eat, feeding each other little morsels.

* * *

A new stasis, and Grunty came fighting up out of blackness. He sat up abruptly, glanced around the ship. The Captain was sprawled out across the cushions, his compact body and outflung arm forming the poured-out, spring-steel laxness usually seen only in sleeping cats. The loverbirds, even in deep unconsciousness, lay like hardly separate parts of something whole, the small one on the couch, the tall one on the deck, prone, reaching, supplicating.

Grunty snorted and hove to his feet. He crossed the cabin and stood looking down on Rootes.

*The hummingbird is a yellowjacket*, said his words. *Buzz and*

*There were the same three figures, identical in every respect to the previous ones, except for one detail: they were all naked.*

*dart, hiss and flash away. Swift and hurtful, hurtful . . .*

He stood for a long moment, his great shoulder muscles working one against the other, and his mouth trembled.

He looked at the loverbirds, who were still motionless. His eyes slowly narrowed.

His words tumbled and climbed, and ordered themselves:

*I through love have learned*
*three things,*
*Sorrow, sin and death it brings.*
*Yet day by day my heart within*
*Dares shame and sorrow, death*
*and sin. . . .*

And dutifully he added *Samuel Ferguson, born 1810.* He glared at the loverbirds, and brought his fist into his palm with a sound like a club on an anthill. They had heard him again, and this time they did not smile, but looked into each other's eyes and then turned together to regard him, nodding gravely.

* * *

Rootes went through Grunty's books, leafing and casting aside. He had never touched them before. "Buncha crap," he jeered. "Garden of the Plynck. Wind in the Willows. Worm Ouroborous. Kid stuff"

Grunty lumbered across and patiently gathered up the books the Captain had flung aside, putting them one by one back into

their places, stroking them as if they had been bruised.

"Isn't there nothing in here with pictures?"

Grunty regarded him silently for a moment and then took down a tall volume. The Captain snatched it, leafed through it. "Mountains," he growled. "Old houses." He leafed. "Damn boats." He smashed the book to the deck. "Haven't you got *any* of what I want?"

Grunty waited attentively.

"Do I have to draw a diagram?" the Captain roared. "Got that ol' itch, Grunty. You wouldn't know. I feel like looking at pictures, get what I mean?"

Grunty stared at him, utterly without expression, but deep within him a panic squirmed. The Captain never, *never* behaved like this in mid-voyage. It was going to get worse, he realized. Much worse. And quickly.

He shot the loverbirds a vicious, hate-filled glance. If they weren't aboard . . .

There could be no waiting. Not now. Something had to be done. Something . . .

"Come on, come on," said Rootes. "Goddlemighty Godfrey, even a deadbutt like you must have *something* for kicks."

Grunty turned away from him, squeezed his eyes closed for a tortured second, then pulled himself together. He ran his hand over the books, hesitated, and finally brought out a large, heavy one. He handed it to the Captain and went forward to the console. He slumped down there over the file of computer tapes, pretending to be busy.

The Captain sprawled onto Grunty's couch and opened the book. "Michelangelo, what the hell," he growled. He grunted, almost like his shipmate. "Statues," he half-whispered, in withering scorn. But he ogled and leafed at last, and was quiet.

The loverbirds looked at him with a sad tenderness, and then together sent beseeching glances at Grunty's angry back.

The matrix-pattern for Terra slipped through Grunty's fingers, and he suddenly tore the tape across, and across again. A filthy place, Terra. *There is nothing*, he thought, *like the conservatism of license*. Given a culture of sybaritics, with an endless choice of mechanical titillations, and you have a people of unbreakable and hidebound formality, a people with few but massive taboos, a shockable, narrow, prissy people obeying the rules — even the rules of their calculated depravities — and protecting their treasured, specialized pruderies. In such a group there are words one may not use for fear of their fanged laughter, colors one may not wear, gestures and intonations one must forego, on pain of being torn to pieces. The rules are complex and abso-

lute, and in such a place one's heart may not sing lest, through its warm free joyousness, it betrays one.

And if you must have joy of such a nature, if you must be free to be your pressured self, then off to space . . . off to the glittering black lonelinesses. And let the days go by, and let the time pass, and huddle beneath your impenetrable integument, and wait, and wait, and every once in a long while you will have that moment of lonely consciousness when there is no one around to see; and then it may burst from you and you may dance, or cry, or twist the hair on your head till your eyeballs blaze, or do any of the other things your so unfashionable nature thirstily demands.

It took Grunty half a lifetime to find this freedom. No price would be too great to keep it. Not lives, nor interplanetary diplomacy, nor Earth itself were worth such a frightful loss.

He would lose it if anyone knew, and the loverbirds knew.

He pressed his heavy hands together until the knuckles crackled. Dirbanu, reading it all from the ardent minds of the loverbirds; Dirbanu flashing the news across the stars; the roar of reaction, and then Rootes, Rootes, when the huge and ugly impact washed over him . . .

So let Dirbanu be offended. Let Terra accuse this ship of fumbling, even of teachery — anything but the withering news the loverbirds had stolen.

* * *

ANOTHER new stasis, and Grunty's first thought as he came alive in the silent ship was *It has to be soon.*

He rolled off the couch and glared at the unconscious loverbirds. The helpless loverbirds.

Smash their heads in.

Then Rootes . . . what to tell Rootes?

The loverbirds attacked him, tried to seize the ship?

He shook his head like a bear in a beehive. Rootes would never believe that. Even if the loverbirds could open the door, which they could not, it was more than ridiculous to imagine those two bright and slender things attacking anyone — especially not so rugged and massive an opponent.

Poison? No — there was nothing in the efficient, unfailingly beneficial food stores that might help.

His glance strayed to the Captain, and he stopped breathing.

Of *course!*

He ran to the Captain's personal lockers. He should have known that such a cocky little hound as Rootes could not live, could not strut and prance as he did unless he had a weapon. And if it was the kind of weapon that such a man would characteris-

tically choose —

A movement caught his eye as he searched.

The loverbirds were awake.

That wouldn't matter.

He laughed at them, a flashing, ugly laugh. They cowered close together and their eyes grew very bright.

They knew.

He was aware that they were suddenly very busy, as busy as he. And then he found the gun.

It was a snug little thing, smooth and intimate in his hand. It was exactly what he had guessed, what he had hoped for — just what he needed. It was silent. It would leave no mark. It need not even be aimed carefully. Just a touch of its feral radiation and throughout the body, the axones suddenly refuse to propagate nerve impulses. No thought leaves the brain, no slightest contraction of heart or lung occurs again, ever. And afterward, no sign remains that a weapon has been used.

He went to the serving window with the gun in his hand. *When he wakes, you will be dead,* he thought. *Couldn't recover from stasis blackout. Too bad. But no one's to blame, hm? We never had Dirbanu passengers before. So how could we know?*

The loverbirds, instead of flinching, were crowding close to the window, their faces beseeching, their delicate hands signing and signalling, frantically trying to convey something.

He touched the control, and the panel slid back.

The taller loverbird held up something as if it would shield him. The other pointed at it, nodded urgently, and gave him one of those accursed, hauntingly sweet smiles.

Grunty put up his hand to sweep the thing aside, and then checked himself.

It was only a piece of paper.

All the cruelty of humanity rose up in Grunty. *A species that can't protect itself doesn't deserve to live.* He raised the gun.

And then he saw the pictures.

Economical and accurate, and, for all their subject, done with the ineffable grace of the loverbirds themselves, the pictures showed three figures:

Grunty himself, hulking, impassive, the eyes glowing, the tree-trunk legs and hunched shoulders.

Rootes, in a pose so characteristic and so cleverly done that Grunty gasped. Crisp and clean, Rootes' image had one foot up on a chair, both elbows on the high knee, the head half turned. The eyes fairly sparkled from the paper.

And a girl.

She was beautiful. She stood with her arms behind her, her feet slightly apart, her face down a little. She was deep-eyed, pensive, and to see her was to be silent, to wait for those downcast lids to lift and break the spell.

Grunty frowned and faltered. He lifted a puzzled gaze from these exquisite renderings to the loverbirds, and met the appeal, the earnest, eager, hopeful faces.

The loverbird put a second paper against the glass.

There were the same three figures, identical in every respect to the previous ones, except for one detail: they were all naked.

He wondered how they knew human anatomy so meticulously.

Before he could react, still another sheet went up.

The loverbirds, this time — the tall one, the shorter one, hand in hand. And next to them a third figure, somewhat similar, but tiny, very round, and with grotesquely short arms.

Grunty stared at the three sheets, one after the other. There was something . . . something . . .

And then the loverbird put up the fourth sketch, and slowly, slowly, Grunty began to understand. In the last picture, the loverbirds were shown exactly as before, except that they were naked, and so was the small creature beside them. He had never seen loverbirds naked before. Possibly no one had.

Slowly he lowered the gun. He began to laugh. He reached through the window and took both the loverbirds' hands in one

*"The lifeboat . . . you mean they took the lifeboat?"*

of his, and they laughed with him.

* * *

Rootes stretched easily with his eyes closed, pressed his face down into the couch, and rolled over. He dropped his feet to the deck, held his head in his hands and yawned. Only then did he realize that Grunty was standing just before him.

"What's the matter with you?"

He followed Grunty's grim gaze.

The glass door stood open.

Rootes bounced to his feet as if the couch had turned white-hot. "Where — what —"

Grunty's crag of a face was turned to the starboard bulkhead. Rootes spun to it, balanced on the balls of his feet as if he were boxing. His smooth face gleamed in the red glow of the light over the airlock.

"The lifeboat . . . you mean they took the lifeboat? They got away?"

Grunty nodded.

Rootes held his head. "Oh, fine," he moaned. He whipped around to Grunty. "And where the hell were you when this happened?"

"Here."

"Well, what in God's name happened?" Rootes was on the trembling edge of foaming hysteria.

Grunty thumped his chest.

"You're not trying to tell me you let them go?"

Grunty nodded, and waited — not for very long.

"I'm going to burn you down," Rootes raged. "I'm going to break you so low you'll have to climb for twelve years before you get a barracks to sweep. And after I get done with you I'll turn you over to the Service. What do you think they'll do to you? What do you think they're going to do to *me?*"

He leapt at Grunty and struck him a hard, cutting blow to the cheek. Grunty kept his hands down and made no attempt to avoid the fist. He stood immovable, and waited.

"Maybe those were criminals, but they were Dirbanu nationals," Rootes roared when he could get his breath. "How are we going to explain this to Dirbanu? Do you realize this could mean war?"

Grunty shook his head.

"What do you mean? You know something. You better talk while you can. Come on, bright boy — what are we going to tell Dirbanu?"

Grunty pointed at the empty cell. "Dead," he said.

"What good will it do us to say they're dead? They're not. They'll show up again some day, and —"

Grunty shook his head. He pointed to the star chart. Dirbanu showed as the nearest body. There was no livable planet within thousands of parsecs.

"They didn't go to Dirbanu!"

"Nuh."

"Damn it, it's like pulling rivets to get anything out of you. In that lifeboat they go to Dirbanu — which they won't — or they head out, maybe for years, to the Rim stars. That's all they can do!"

Grunty nodded.

"And you think Dirbanu won't track them, won't bring 'em down?"

"No ships."

"They have ships!"

"Nuh."

"The loverbirds told you?"

Grunty agreed.

"You mean their own ship that they destroyed, and the one the ambassador used were all they had?"

"Yuh."

Rootes strode up and back. "I don't get it. I don't begin to get it. What did you do it for, Grunty?"

Grunty stood for a moment, watching Rootes' face. Then he went to the computing desk. Rootes had no choice but to follow. Grunty spread out the four drawings.

"What's this? Who drew these? *Them?* What do you know. *Damn!* Who is the chick?"

Grunty patiently indicated all of the pictures in one sweep. Rootes looked at him, puzzled, looked at one of Grunty's eyes, then the other, shook his head, and applied himself to the pictures again. "This is more like it," he murmured. "Wish I'd 'a known they could draw like this." Again Grunty drew his attention to all the pictures and away from the single drawing that fascinated him.

"There's you, there's me. Right? Then this chick. Now, here we are again, all buff naked. Damn, what a carcass. All right, all right, I'm going on. Now, this is the prisoners, right? And who's the little fat one?"

Grunty pushed the fourth sheet over. "Oh," said Rootes. "Here everybody's naked too. Hm."

He yelped suddenly and bent close. Then he rapidly eyed all four sheets in sequence. His face began to get red. He gave the fourth picture a long, close scrutiny. Finally he put his finger on the sketch of the round little alien. "This is . . . a . . . a Dirbanu —"

Grunty nodded. "Female."

"Then those two — they were —"

Grunty nodded.

"So that's it!" Rootes fairly shrieked in fury. "You mean we been shipped out all this time with a coupla God damned *fairies?* Why, if I'd a' known that I'd a killed 'em!"

"Yuh."

Rootes looked up at him with a growing respect and considerable amusement. "So you got rid of 'em so's I wouldn't kill 'em and mess everything up?" He scratched his head. "Well, I'll be billy-be-

damned. You got a think-tank on you after all. Anything I can't stand, it's a fruit."

Grunty nodded.

"God," said Rootes, "It figures. It really figures. Their females don't look anything like the males. Compared with them, our females are practically identical to us. So the ambassador comes, and sees what looks like a planet full of queers. He knows better but he can't stand the sight. So back he goes to Dirbanu, and Earth gets brushed off."

Grunty nodded.

"Then these pansies here run off to earth, figuring they'll be at home. They damn near made it, too. But Dirbanu calls 'em back, not wanting the likes of them representing their planet. I don't blame 'em a bit. How would you feel if the only Terran on Dirbanu was a fluff? Wouldn't you want him out of there, but quick?"

Grunty said nothing.

"And now," said Rootes, "we better give Dirbanu the good news."

He went forward to the communicator.

It took a surprisingly short time to contact the shrouded planet. Dirbanu acknowledged and coded out a greeting. The decoder over the console printed the message for them:

GREETINGS STARMITE 439. ESTABLISH ORBIT. CAN YOU DROP PRISONERS TO DIRBANU? NEVER MIND PARACHUTE

"Whew," said Rootes. "Nice people. Hey, you notice they don't say come on in. They never expected to let us land. Well, what'll we tell 'em about their lavender lads?"

"Dead," said Grunty.

"Yeah," said Rootes. "That's what they want anyway." He sent rapidly.

In a few minutes the response clattered out of the decoder.

STAND BY FOR TELEPATH SWEEP. WE MUST CHECK. PRISONERS MAY BE PRETENDING DEATH.

"Oh-oh," said the Captain. "This is where the bottom drops out."

"Nuh," said Grunty, calmly.

"But their detector will locate — oh — I see what you're driving at. No life, no signal. Same as if they weren't here at all."

"Yuh."

The coder clattered.

DIRBANU GRATEFUL. CONSIDER MISSION COMPLETE. DO NOT WANT BODIES. YOU MAY EAT THEM.

Rootes retched. Grunty said, "Custom."

The decoder kept clattering.

NOW READY FOR RECIPROCAL AGREEMENT WITH TERRA.

"We go home in a blaze of glory," Rootes exulted. He sent,

TERRA ALSO READY. WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST?

The decoder paused, then:

*(Concluded on page 123)*

# The CASTAWAY

## by Murray Leinster

**Dogs cringed and men stiffened with instinctive hatred in the presence of this lonely creature, cut off from his kind, who asked for friendship.**

THE fireball passed over Tateville about nine o'clock at night. Ben Lyon had closed up the newspaper office and was walking home, with things arranged so he could go off on a fishing trip in the morning. A cow was lowing somewhere, and there were other noises normal to the little town. Away in the night somebody was singing — with tall mountains all about, Tateville didn't get good radio reception and was mercifully so far free of television — and an ancient car labored valiantly to climb some distant hill.

He reached the corner where he should turn to his boarding-house. He stopped and looked and listened. There is a feeling about living in a small town. It isn't just a place, but this place. Not just a town, but this town. The noises were not just noises, but So-and-So's dog barking, or Mrs. Something's daughter Kate shouting cheerfully to her deaf grandfather, or So-and-So working on the garage he was building by lanternlight. The mountains to the west and south and north weren't impersonal. They had their names and outlines and variegated look at different seasons. Even the stars seemed like very particular stars, individual to this place.

Ben lifted his eyes to look at them.

The fireball went over.

It was a bright spot of flame with a long burning tail behind it, moving deliberately from west to east. It was much too bright to be an aeroplane's light. The trailing tail of fire proved that it wasn't a man-made thing. It rolled across the roof of stars, somehow steadily, somehow solidly, faster than any plane could move, and yet not darting to ex-

tinction like an ordinary shooting star. Ben Lyon watched it interestedly. It should be an extra-big meteor — a big hunk of stone or metal from somewhere between the stars — which packed air before it and raised it to incandescence as it rushed across the sky. Being big, it would be visible at a greater height than small shooting stars, and so would seem to move more slowly.

He watched it all the way across the sky. He moved two steps to keep it in view past the fir-tree at the corner. It went on like an express train, away past the nearer mountains to the east. He thought it was slowing, but he could not be sure. When the mountain-tops hid it, it was still ploughing its way onward through the night. Once he thought it brightened for half a second, and then went back to its steady glare. But he wasn't certain. It disappeared.

Then, long, long seconds after it had passed, he heard a whispering noise that seemed to come from the west and pass overhead and die away to the eastward. It wasn't loud. It sounded like it might be the ghost of something following after the fireball. But it was the noise the thing had made up where the air was vastly thin. It had taken so long to get down to the ground, just as a steamer's wake may not reach shore until the steamer has gone on out of sight.

Ben looked at his watch. 9:06. He'd leave an item about it to be run in the newspaper while he was off fishing in the mountains. He went comfortably on to his boarding-house and went up to his room and got ready for bed. He was all packed for the fishing-trip. He wondered mildly about the fireball. Sometimes they exploded into two or three parts. Sometimes they dwindled and burned out. Sometimes they fell to earth.

There were not many people in the mountains to the east. If the fireball did reach ground, it was unlikely to be seen. It would land unnoticed and vegetation would grow over it, and if it was metal it would rust away and if stone it would crumble, and the thing that had come so many thousands of millions of millions of miles to Earth would be indistinguishable from any other rock. Its origin and adventures would never be guessed at.

Ben hadn't the faintest idea that the fireball was unusual in any way, or that its coming would have any other consequences than those of an ordinary shooting star — which was none at all.

IN THE morning he had to wait for the bus, on which the man who would run the newspaper in his absence would arrive. He showed his substitute the few things needful, and read the news

of the great world in the newspapers brought on the bus. He discovered that the fireball wasn't even Tateville's private phenomenon, but had been watched all the way across the state before passing overhead here. It had flamed along a four-hundred-mile path — sometimes brighter and sometimes dimmer — before passing on into the mountains. The professor of astronomy at the University had been queried, and he pointed out that it had approached earth at a very shallow angle, as witnessed by its long visible flight. Perhaps, he suggested, it had merely hit Earth's atmosphere a glancing blow, and had bounced on out into space, and now was speeding on through emptiness again, to continue its travels for some thousands of millions of years to come.

Ben left a memo for an item in the Tateville *Record* and went on out of town, riding the horse that was his principal extravagance. Fishing was both a reason and an excuse for long camping-trips among the mountains. He'd stop at Tom Hartle's very tiny ranch in a valley a day's ride away, and pick up Tom, and the two of them would start off. There'd be a packhorse, and fly-rods in the pack, and there were places in the wilds where golden mountain trout were to be found, and there was a certain lake where fighting bass waited. He thought of such things as he rode out of town into apparent wilderness. He and Tom had been in the war together, and they didn't talk about it, but they did share the outlook of a common experience and a mutual distrust of civilized life. Ben felt an enormous restfulness come over him as the last sign of civilization disappeared behind him.

He traveled at leisure, and by a way which avoided even the scattered habitations of the wilderness. When he reached Tom's place it was already dark, but he had stopped before sunset and a string of speckled beauties hung from his saddlebow.

Tom wasn't at the ranch. There was nobody at all in sight or hearing about the ranchhouse. But Ben made himself at home, cooked the trout, feasted happily, and afterward sat and smoked comfortably on the ranchhouse porch. The horses in the corral made noises from time to time. Tom Hartle and only two hands ran this very small spread in the mountains, and it was utterly peaceful here, and to sit on the dark porch and know complete stillness felt very good to a man who'd had his fill of civilization during wartime.

There were sudden snortings at the corral. There was a pounding of hooves. The horses were disturbed. They acted frightened. Ben listened. Of course nothing dangerous to a horse would come

actually to the ranch corral. Of course! But the stirring increased. It sounded panicky. There was the sound of kickings.

He got a flashlight and a rifle and went down to see. The horses were sweating and frightened. He went around the outside of the corral fence, using the flashlight and looking for tracks. He found nothing.

He stayed with the horses until they quieted down. Then he went back to the house. He settled comfortably in his chair again. He struck a match and relighted his pipe. Tom and the hands would be back presently. If they'd expected to be gone long, Tom would have left a note for him.

Quietness. Stillness. Peace — with innumerable tiny sounds in the starlight. Ben smoked and deliberately soaked himself in tranquility.

A voice in the darkness said:

"Hello."

"Hi," said Ben cheerfully. "Tom?"

There was a distinct pause. Then the voice said:

"No, not Tom. Who're you?"

Ben grunted. In five words the voice had become wholly familiar. It was whiskered, ancient Stub Evans, so wholly worthless that nobody else would hire him even for his keep. But Tom Hartle paid him carefully calculated wages that let him get drunk once a month, but not stay drunk long enough to harm him.

"Hello, Stub," said Ben. "This is Ben. Come up and set."

Again a pause. Then the voice said:

"I'm not Stub." But it was Stub's voice. Unquestionably.

"Whoever you are," said Ben, "come up and set a while. Don't stay out there in the dark. Where's Tom?"

The voice did not answer. It was curiously unnatural. People don't act that way. Bud felt a peculiar unease. For some reason he picked up the flashlight he'd found for his trip to the corral. He turned it on. He heard an abrupt movement. It was as if Stub had made a frightened, panicky dash out of possible range of the light-beam. And when Ben swept the light around he did not see Stub or anybody else.

"What's the trouble, Stub?" he demanded. "What are you hiding for?"

A long pause. Then Stub's voice said:

"I've got my reasons. Put out the light. I want to ask a question."

Ben got up. He felt queer. He found that he'd picked up the rifle he'd carried down to the corral. But he snapped off the light. He was distinctly, unreasonably uneasy.

"Well?" he said. "What's the matter? Drunk?"

A very slight pause. Then:

"No, I'm not drunk." The intonation of the voice did not match the words. Ben realized that while it was Stub's voice, in denying drunkenness it did not convey Stub's indignation at such a question. "I want to ask you if —" There was another pause. "It is hard to say. If you see a very strange thing, will you kill it?"

Ben found the hairs at the back of his neck standing up. He'd no reason to feel that way, but he did. He grew irritated.

"Stop it, Stub!" he said impatiently. "Come up on the porch or go to hell! I don't feel like playing games!"

Far away, there was a remote, high-pitched yelping. And immediately there was movement in the darkness nearby. Something rustled swiftly away into the night. Ben swore irritably. He snapped on the flashlight and its dot of light darted here and there. But it showed nothing but the absolutely familiar details of Tom Hartle's ranchhouse surroundings. Ben went down from the porch. He heard a rustling a little distance off. He swept the flashlight that way.

He saw a fair-sized something dart behind a rock. It ran on two legs. It was nearly or quite as big as a man. But when one sees a man one knows it. Recognition is a simple matter, not depending on details. But Ben didn't recognize this as a man. The hair at the back of his neck seemed to crawl. Chills ran up and down his spine. But the thing ran out of sight before he could be sure of anything but that it acted and moved like a man, but wasn't. It wasn't human.

He was still standing at that one spot, the flashlight beam darting nervously here and there, when Tom Hartle came loping up. Irritated, whining dogs ran with his horse, keeping much too close to the animal's heels. They whimpered from time to time.

"Hiya, Ben," said Tom in the darkness. "Seen anything queer?"

"I'm not sure," said Ben slowly. He wasn't quite willing to believe his eyes. "I'm not at all sure. But I heard something queer. Stub Evans was talking to me from the dark, but he wouldn't come up to the porch — What's the matter?"

"You weren't talking to Stub," said Tom sharply. "He wasn't here! He's been off —"

"But I know his voice," protested Ben. "Only he talked queerly —"

"It wasn't Stub," insisted Tom. "Here he comes now."

Two other horses were coming, more slowly than Tom had ridden. There was Brick Toohey riding the first horse, and the second was led. And slung over the led horse, hanging limply, his arms and legs swaying with the motion of the horse, there was Stub Evans. Ben Lyon gaped at him.

"Got to get him in the house now," said Tom. To Ben he added. "He's asleep. I can't find anything else wrong with him. Can't wake him up. But he's not drunk."

It was completely impossible. The voice Ben had heard was specifically Stub Evans', and no other. But he walked with the led horse to the ranchhouse, and helped unload Stub, and helped carry him inside. He slept, snoring. His pulse was strong and natural. His breathing was that of a man in the deepest possible natural slumber. He would have passed for dead-drunk any day except that there was no smell of liquor about him. Tom looked down at him, scowling.

"There was a fireball in the sky last night," he said dourly, "and it came down beyond the mountains over yonder." He gestured with his thumb. "We heard the roaring. We went out on the porch. The thing came down out of the air, trailing fire behind it and spitting out fire ahead. We watched it go down in the next valley over. Seemed like we heard it hit. There was a grumbling noise afterward. And I'd heard that fireballs or shooting stars were worth a little something. Stub went over to see if he could pick up the shooting-star stuff. He rode over about sunrise and didn't come back. Along about three

o'clock we went over to look for him. We found his horse, but no Stub. There was a dozen acres of new-fallen landslide where the fireball had hit. The shock started it sliding down. Stub couldn't find anything in that mess! So we hunted for him. Along about sundown he hollered back to us. We went and found him. He was sound asleep against a tree. He's been asleep ever since, just like he is now."

Ben frowned. He drew a deep breath.

"Seemed funny," added Tom harshly, "that he could call to us, and then be so sound asleep when we came to him. It's funnier that he was talking to you when he was slung across his horse, miles away."

Ben said:

"I'd've sworn it was Stub, only he wouldn't let me see him. And I — did see something queer."

"The dogs act queer," snapped Tom. "Their hackles stand up and they snarl and bark and yelp, but they won't trail. They've been like that all the way over here. Something that scares them came this way. What was it?"

Ben told his story, uncomfortably.

"Stub's voice spoke to me," he finished doggedly, "whether or not he was with you. Whatever was using his voice wouldn't come to the light, and asked if I saw

something queer if I'd kill it. And I — went out and I saw something queer. I think I did! But it wasn't a man."

"Where'd you see it?" asked Tom.

Ben led the way. When he went out of the ranchhouse door the dogs were clumped there, whimpering. Ben went through the starlit night with Tom and Brick, and the dogs came with them, but practically underfoot.

The dogs caught a scent and snarled and yelped, but did not go on ahead of the men. They stayed very close.

The party reached the place where Ben had seen something which was not a man as it darted behind a rock. Here the dogs gave tongue to an ullulating, panic-stricken uproar in the night. But they would not trail.

Behind the rock where the thing had vanished there was a soft place in the earth and a track there. It was almost large enough to be the track of a man. But it wasn't. None of the four of them had ever seen such a footprint before.

They looked at it in the flashlight's glow. The stars shone down from above the mountains. The nightwind was still. There were very, very faint whisperings among the branches of nearby trees. Tom breathed hard.

"You're dead sure it talked to you, Ben?"

"Something did," said Ben. "In Stub's voice. It asked if I'd kill something very strange if I saw it."

There was a pause. A dog sniffed at the track with its tail between its legs. It snarled and bristled and yelped all at once, but it shrank back from the print in the soft earth.

"Remember?" said Tom detachedly. "There was a fireball last night."

A voice spoke abruptly from somewhere overhead. It spoke in the exact tone and pronunciation of Stub Evans, who was now sleeping heavily back in the ranchhouse. But it could not be Stub himself. Obviously.

"I am a castaway," said the voice from the hillside. "I want to make friends"

But then it couldn't be heard any more. The dogs screamed their hatred of the thing that spoke. There was a tumult of snarls and yelpings and frenzied barkings in the night. Ben said:

"I'm going up there."

HE UNLIMBERED the flashlight he had used before. Flicking the light back and forth before him, he started to climb the hillside. The dogs seemed to go crazy. Tom shouted something Ben couldn't make out as he went up the hill. Ben went onward, sweeping the light from side to side, and keeping the rifle he'd grasped,

like Tom, when they left the house — keeping his rifle ready.

He knew of no movement, but something "plopped" to the ground before him, and instantly there was a flare of such monstrous heat and unbearable brightness that he stopped short without willing it. The flare was blue-white in temperature. He felt its savage heat upon him for an instant. He saw a weed-stalk burst into steam even though the brightness did not envelope it.

But then he could not see anything but the image of the flame in his dazzled eyes. The light died, and he smelled baked earth and shriveled vegetation. He heard Tom shouting, downhill, and the screaming of the dogs. A dogged, obstinate defiance filled him. Something which called itself a castaway had used a weapon of heat and flame to warn him not to approach. It was not a human weapon. He could not face it. But he would not flee from it.

He stood there, bristling, while the dogs screamed and snarled, and while Tom strove to yell above their din. The back of his neck crawled, but he glared with blinded eyes up at the blackness from which the warning deadly flame had come.

A long time later, having given whatever was up on the hillside a dozen chances to kill him if it wished, he went slowly down the hill again.

On the face of it, there was nothing else for him to do. On the face of it, too, there was nothing for the others to do but go back to the ranchhouse and engage in long and completely useless discussion. It was wasted time and speculation, because Stub Evans woke up abruptly, just about dawn, and told them facts they had not guessed at.

HE'D REACHED the spot where the fireball landed, he said, and saw that its impact had set off a landslide that buried it hopelessly in twelve acres of tumbled ground. He'd been indignant at having the ride for nothing, and dismounted and began to hunt for possible fragments of the thing from space that might have fallen short of the main body. As he hunted, he felt creepy. Chills ran up and down his spine. And suddenly he couldn't move. He was frozen where he stood: paralyzed; while something came up behind him and fumbled at his body and his garments. Presently something cold touched his temples. Up to this point he had felt the ghastly impotence of a creature fascinated by a snake, except that his helplessness was the more horrible because he could not see the thing that caused it. But when the coldness touched his temples he felt all sensation drain from him. He knew nothing. Nothing whatever. Everything was a blank to him

until he waked back in the ranch-house. He didn't remember calling to guide Tom and Brick to where he lay sleeping heavily, nor the long ride over his saddle back to the ranch.

He bewilderedly and apprehensively finished his tale just as the dawnlight grew bright. Ben became conscious of the light when he realized that the dogs were crowded fearfully close to the door. Now and again they growled, with raised hackles. Sometimes they whined. They stayed close to the house while Tom cooked bacon and flapjacks and made coffee. As the men ate — Ben marveled mildly that mystery did not affect one's appetite — they could be heard very near. Once or twice a dog scratched imploringly at the door.

"Something looks like it's spoiled a bunch of good dogs," said Tom, frowning. "They were good dogs till yesterday. Now they're scared. Ben, what d'you think?"

Ben said briefly:

"It said it was a castaway."

"What said it?" demanded Stub.

"The thing that talked like you," said Ben. "The thing that paralyzed you and put something to your temples and apparently learned how to talk from what was in your mind."

Tom growled.

"And used a flame-thrower to warn Ben back."

"Yes," agreed Ben. "Only that wasn't a flame-thrower like we use. Something landed and flared. Call it a flame-grenade, or maybe a heat-bomb. It would stop any creature, I'd say. It stopped me. A nice trick for a castaway to use to defend himself with. It could be a castaway, at that." Then he thought wryly of civilization as he'd seen it twisted and distorted to the purposes of war. "The Earth would be a desert island, and we'd be savages. We'd be the murderous natives, riding on animals across mountains to the spot where a wrecked — ah — boat had landed, to hunt for survivors of the wreck. A castaway might manage to sight a single one of the natives first, and paralyze him, and read his mind and learn how to talk to the natives, but he'd be appalled at the violence and brutality of the savage's thoughts. That's you, Stub!"

He grinned at Stub, without mirth.

Tom Hartle looked at Ben, hard.

"You think the fireball was something else too?"

Ben said:

"There isn't any sensible explanation. The whole business is unreasonable. It might have a fantastic explanation. I just offered one."

"I figured nearly the same thing," said Tom Hartle, slowly.

"I'm remembering that the thing said that *it* was a castaway, not that *they* were castaways. Right?"

"Yes."

"Then we've got to find it," said Tom flatly. "If there are creatures that have got spaceships and such, then compared to them we are savages. And if there's a castaway on earth that we humans seem savages to, then he's pretty dangerous. We've got to get him — it."

Stub said plaintively:

"What the hell're you talkin' about, Tom?"

"I'm saying that Ben and I aren't going on a fishing trip like we planned," said Tom. "We're going hunting."

Ben felt queer. He said:

"After all, if there is a creature and it is a castaway. . . . It's in a bad fix. It's marooned. And it said it wanted to make friends. . . ."

"I knew a pilot in the Pacific," said Tom curtly. "He was cast away when his plane conked out. He made an island. He made friends with the natives. Sure! He wanted help in signalling for a rescue. He wanted help to make a boat to head back home in. They helped him. They made a signal. He was working on a boat — and they were helping him — when a destroyer came by and picked him up. His signal had been seen. The destroyer left a party on the island to watch for other castaways and for possible submarines. It grew up into a small base. What happened to the natives?"

His tone was sardonic. He drank his coffee and got up. He went rummaging in one of the other rooms of the ranchhouse. He came back with repeating shotguns and buckshot shells and other items. He made two fairly neat packs to be strapped behind one's saddle. There was food for three or four days, and blankets. And armament enough for a war.

"Stub," he said shortly, "you and Brick take care of the ranch. Ben and me — we're going off. You two stick together when you leave the house. Keep a couple of the dogs indoors at night and take 'em with you wherever you go."

Stub said blankly:

"You' goin' to hunt that critter you've been talking about?"

"We know it's here," said Tom. "It knows we know. If it's smart enough to learn how to talk English out of your brain, Stub, it's pretty sure to know everything else you do. So it'll know better than to hang around here. It'll make for a place where nobody knows about it. And it'll try to get, there, whatever it wants to make friends for."

Stub scratched his head.

"That don't make sense to me!" he complained.

"Right! That's what I hoped."

He went off to the corral. In minutes he was back before the ranchhouse with two horses. He slung a saddle-holster for a shotgun on each of them, in addition to the rifle-holsters already attached. He lashed the small packs in place. Then he drove two of the dogs indoors, to remain with Brick and Stub, and mounted and waited for Ben.

Ben mounted, but almost reluctantly. There was a slightly crawly sensation at the back of his neck. He felt a completely unreasonable aversion to the hunt. It was partly the sort of shuddery uneasiness a man feels at the thought of the uncanny or the supernatural. It was partly a natural sympathy with an imagined castaway on an alien and a hostile world. But also he remembered that instinctive hatred he'd felt on the hillside, when a weapon he could not defy had blazed up before him. He felt that too.

They rode off. Tom matter-of-factly headed toward the hillside Ben had essayed to climb. He put his mount at the ascent, with the dogs trotting close beside his horse's hoofs.

They reached the hill-crest, and the dogs created an uproar of agitated whinings and yelps. They bristled at an empty space of ground, where something had pulled away grass and left a patch of bare earth. In the earth there were scratchings made with a stick. The scratchings spelled out, "*Man, I want to make friends.*"

Tom's expression was hard. He nodded at the scratched lines.

"He read Stub's mind, all right. Knows how to read and write. But he calls us 'man.' That means he's something else."

Ben said helplessly:

"This is crazy!"

"Not if you're right about the fireball being something else," said Tom, inexorably. "We're savage natives on a desert isle — or desert planet. What happens to savages when civilized people find 'em? What happened to the Indians? To the Incas? What happened in the South Seas? Want that to happen to all the Earth?" To the dogs he added, "Find him, boy! Go find him!"

But the dogs hung back. They trailed gingerly, whining. They did not like what they were hunting. At once they tended to snarl and to cringe and whimper. But they did show the way.

The trail led from this hill-crest into a ravine between higher hills yet. They went on painstakingly. Presently, for no reason whatever, Ben found prickles running up and down his spine. He found himself sweating.

"I think it's watching us," he said uneasily.

"Yeah," said Tom. "I feel it too. Keep your gun handy."

They went on. The dogs made a great to-do about a place where brush almost closed the way before them. They snarled at the place. Ben noticed that the crawly sensation was stronger. There was nothing to account for the dogs' behavior. They went on, and the crawly feeling diminished.

"I think," said Ben, "we're getting farther away from it."

"My guess," Tom said dispassionately, "is that it was trying to paralyze us like it did Stub. Only maybe because there were two of us it couldn't. Or maybe we were too far away. Oh — oh!"

There was an upcropping of soft rock before them. It was weathered a dark gray. A stone had made lighter-colored scratches on the deeper-tinted rock. The scratchings said: "*Will you be friends?*"

"Maybe we should try," said Ben unhappily.

"It didn't paralyze us," said Tom, "but it'd ought to want to pick our brains like it did Stub's. You want that to happen? Get close to it, and — it could paralyze us like it did him. And it could find out everything we know. We know more than Stub. Some things we know — about government and guns and fighting and such — it'd better not know yet. Better not know at all!"

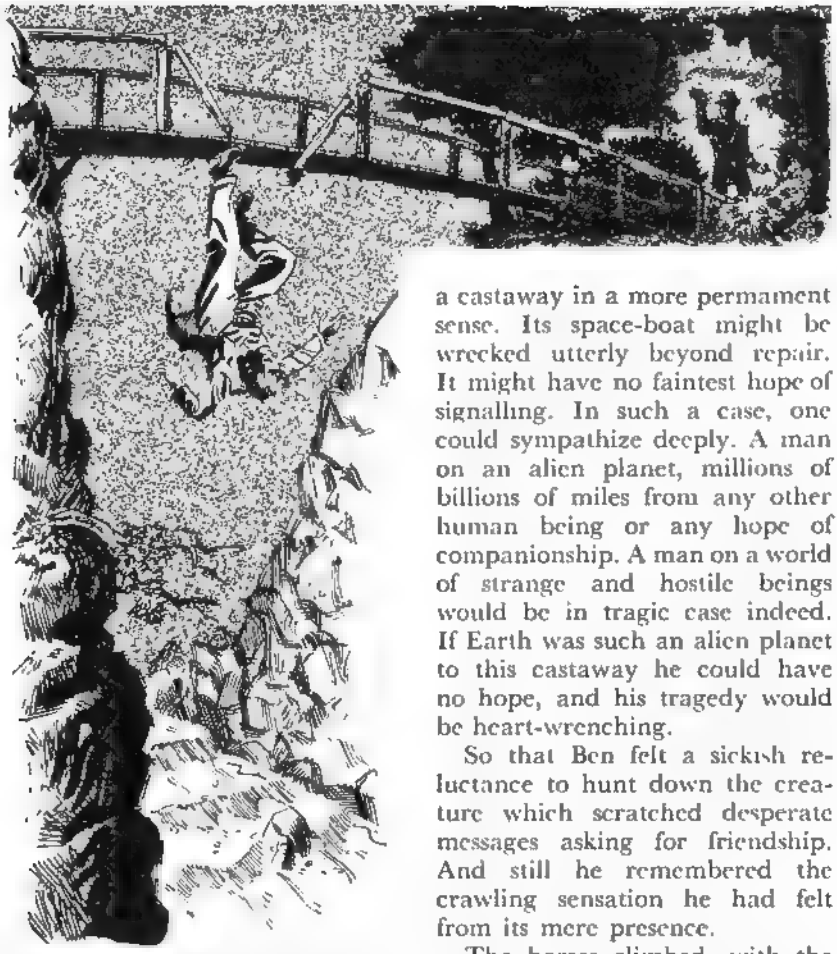
He dismounted with great deliberation. He picked up a scrap of stone and scratched, "*Show yourself*" beneath the other scratchings. He remounted and said, "Come on."

Ben followed. This was still early morning, and in the ravine there were dewdrops on foliage where the sun had not yet warmed the ground. The sky was remarkably blue overhead. There were insect-cries and once or twice there were bird-calls. But there were no other sounds at all except the thumping of the horses' hoofs, and the small snuffling sounds from the dogs. Ben noticed their silence.

"The dogs aren't trailing now."

"I know," said Tom. "The thing doubled back."

But he went on, and Ben began to feel a little bit sick. He saw Tom's intention. And in a very real sense Tom was right. A civilized man cast ashore on any desert island is a deadly danger to the aborigines — unless they kill him. If a race existed of which a member had been cast away on Earth in a wrecked space-craft, that alien creature would be deadly indeed. It was already proved that it could subjugate an individual and learn all that his brain contained. It would naturally look upon men as animals lower than itself. It would not feel any obligation not to injure them, certainly, and if it could repair its space-



***The running figure lurched over the bridge-rail into the stream.***

craft or make a signalling apparatus to call to its fellows. . . . Then humanity would share the fate of other savage races which died or shriveled on contact with civilization.

On the other hand, it could be a castaway in a more permament sense. Its space-boat might be wrecked utterly beyond repair. It might have no faintest hope of signalling. In such a case, one could sympathize deeply. A man on an alien planet, millions of billions of miles from any other human being or any hope of companionship. A man on a world of strange and hostile beings would be in tragic case indeed. If Earth was such an alien planet to this castaway he could have no hope, and his tragedy would be heart-wrenching.

So that Ben felt a sickish reluctance to hunt down the creature which scratched desperate messages asking for friendship. And still he remembered the crawling sensation he had felt from its mere presence.

The horses climbed, with the dogs beginning to act naturally again. They trotted here and there and sniffed absorbedly at this and that. The floor of the ravine dropped below them. They were climbing out of it. They reached its upper rim. And here they could look back and down for a long way, out into the

lower valley in which the ranch-house lay, though the house and corrals were invisible.

"We'll back-track in a minute," said Tom. "It'll think we're going to report what we know."

He went on a quarter-mile, with the dogs rummaging briskly in the underbrush. Then he halted and called them in a low tone. He tethered them and tied the horses.

"The thing scares them," he said dourly. "We don't want 'em running off. We'll need them."

He drew his rifle from the saddle-holster and started back along the way on which they had come. Ben duplicated his actions in a peculiar mingling of pity and revulsion.

It took time to retrace that last quarter of a mile in silence. They disturbed a surprising amount of small life as they went along. A column of ants swarming to and fro between their buried city and some tiny bit of carrion. Birds he had not seen from horseback. There was a rustling that would be a rabbit. And there were infinite varieties of smaller plants among the trees.

They came out, very cautiously, where they could look down at the rock on which something had scratched a plea for friendship.

There was something there now, looking at the scratched, "*Show yourself*," beneath its own message.

IT WAS not human, though it was the size of a man. It was a pale, ash-gray color all over. It had two legs, and a head, and two arms. Ben could not make out whether it was clothed, or in what, or whether the ash-color of its form was the color of the creature itself. There was assuredly a belt about its middle, to which things were fastened. It was too far away for him to see the features of its head. But he could not look too closely anyhow. He wanted to be sick. He quivered in horror and instinctive sympathy and a bristling, unreasoning hostility.

The thing was looking at the writing on the gray stone. It turned. It faced them exactly. Ben felt that prickly, crawling sensation that made the dogs whimper and snarl. The thing seemed to know that they were there and looking at it. It stood still, showing itself defiantly.

Tom fired.

The thing moved with incredible swiftness and agility. To Ben it seemed that it was out of sight before the high-power bullet struck — within inches of where it had stood. The report of the rifle echoed and re-echoed and echoed yet again between the walls of the ravine. And then Tom was swearing bitterly, and Ben was at once relieved and instinctively furious because the thing had not been killed.

He heard his own voice saying strainedly:

"It's warned, now. We'll have to get to town and report that it exists. We'll have to get air-force planes to spot it from the air and soldiers to hunt it on the ground. If it can be captured —"

"Who'll believe us?" asked Tom detachedly.

Ben didn't have to answer. But the answer was, nobody.

Tom wasted no time staring where the thing had vanished. He turned and made his way purposefully back toward the horses. He had a very definite plan of action in his mind.

"Too bad I missed," said Tom dourly. "But I can guess what the thing will do next. It got from Stub's mind — along with how to talk and read and write — what he knows about the country round about. It came to the ranchhouse because he knew about that. It'll go to some other place he knows about, either to try to make friends or to get something it wants. And Stub gets whiskey from Clayton, at his cabin up ahead. Five miles. If we can get there first, we may get another shot at it."

There was nothing for Ben to say. But when they'd reached the horses again, and were mounted and riding for Clayton's cabin, he couldn't help imagining this situation as the castaway would see it. He'd be perhaps hundreds of light-years from any others of his kind. Perhaps there was no hope that any of his kind would ever know what had happened to him. He could be cast away as hopelessly as ever a sailor on an unknown isle. And the scene of his casting away was filled with ferocious native inhabitants with primitive bloodlusts and arbitrary enmities. He'd know that as his presence became known a world would arm to hunt him down to murder him. He'd expect to be hunted untiringly, ruthlessly, terribly.

A man in such a case would become the wild beast his enemies imagined him. He would fight as ferociously as they did. The castaway. . . .

THEY RODE for seven miles instead of five before they reached Clayton's cabin. There was a patch of a garden. There was a crumbling barn. Clayton sat trembling on his doorstep, his sallow face ashen beneath its stubble of beard. His wife was loading a rifle with extraordinarily steady fingers. Her face was like a marble mask. As Ben and Tom Hartle rode into view, she turned burning eyes upon them.

"Some critter kilt my little Sally," she said tonelessly. "Come help me track it down an' kill it."

Her husband quavered:

"It weren't a natural beast. I seen it. No use trackin'."

Tom Hartle said coldly:

"It walked on two legs and it was ash-gray, and dogs were scared of it and it wasn't a human being."

"Y-yeah," whimpered Clayton. Even in the shock of hearing such news, Ben was ashamed that a creature which was not human had encountered such a specimen of the human race.

"I was — a'huntin' for squir'ls," Clayton said, quavering. "Sally was with me. The dogs turned up something they was scared of. They yelped an' howled terrible. I went to see and Sally come with me, and this heah thing came bustin' out an' I let it have both bar'ls, an' lightnin' come from it and I run. . . ."

"Leaving Sally," said Tom.

"It flung lightnin'," whimpered Clayton. "I — forgot."

Tom addressed himself to Clayton's wife.

"Did you telephone for help to hunt it down?" he asked coldly. "We'll help, but there ought to be more — to be certain it's killed."

The woman put down the gun and went into the house with a steady, machine-like precision. They heard the tinkle of the telephone-bell as she cranked it to call central. Tom dismounted and tied up his horse. He considered his arsenal.

"Buckshot for brush," he decided, and took the repeating shotgun. Ben unhappily followed suit.

The woman came out and picked up the rifle and started for the edges of the wooded ground about. They followed. Tom whistled to his dogs to follow. They overtook the woman.

"Where'd it happen?" demanded Tom.

She nodded dumbly in the direction in which she was headed. They marched with her. A part of Ben's mind said dispassionately that the thing they were hunting was not human, and therefore it would not consider humans as other than animals. A man on an alien world would not be choosey. The thing could not be blamed for killing a human child any more than for killing a fawn . . . But there was a murderous red rage filling Ben's veins even as he thought so dispassionately.

The woman sobbed, presently, and Ben saw why. There were footprints on a patch of bare damp ground. A man's and a small child's. They went on. The dogs snuffled curiously.

A scorched smell came on the air through the trees. They moved toward it. They saw Clayton's shotgun, thrown away in his panicked flight. Ben went on, knowing what to look for.

There was a charred place on the ground. It was quite eighteen

inches across. It was baked dry. In the very center, the organic part of the earth was turned to ash and the ash was melted to a curiously glassy slag. Ben knew what had happened. There had been a flash of flame and intolerable heat — which Clayton had called lightning — and nearby shrubs burst into steam. And then there was nothing but a screeching man in blind flight with a little girl left behind.

But there was no sign of the child. No blood. No tracks. No torn scrap from a tiny dress. There was not even, here, any trace of the scent or influence which made dogs snarl and whine and yelp. There was nothing to do but hunt in an expanding circle around the place where Clayton's shotgun had been thrown away. They searched, very grimly.

In a surprisingly brief time other men came through the woods to join the hunt. It spread more rapidly in extent. Within two hours men were arriving even from Tateville, having come as far as possible by car and walked the balance with guns and dogs. In an hour there were twenty men turning over every smallest bush or hiding-place where a child's body could have been thrust. In two hours there were nearer a hundred. The men beat thickets. They searched in caves and under fallen trees. They completely ignored Clayton's story of an unnatural beast and a flash of lightning. Some of them hunted for the tracks of a mountain lion. More, perhaps, hunted for a man.

They found nothing.

The hunt went on and on and on. Ben searched as desperately as any. Now and again some searchers met and conferred in pantings as to where and how to hunt next. As time passed, they did not seem to grow weary. With dwindling hope — not that there had been hope to begin with — fury increased. Men raged as they hunted for the killer of a little girl.

Then Tom came upon Ben as he dug furiously into a brush-pile which was a fallen tree. A child's body could have been hidden in there. Ben almost believed that it was.

But Tom grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him away.

"No use hunting now," he raged bitterly, "we just found a man asleep!"

Ben panted at him, beside himself with fury and hatred. It had grown to mania as he envisioned the terror of a small child in the grip of the ashen-gray creature he and Tom had seen, and which Tom had tried to kill. But Tom shook him.

"The thing took the man's clothes!" raged Tom. "It took his clothes and left him asleep

like Stub was! He can't be waked! You know what that means!"

"I'm thinking about the kid," said Ben thickly. "What does it mean?"

"It means," raged Tom, "that the thing's learned everything another man had in his brain! It's wearing the man's clothes now, and at a distance it'll pass for a man!"

Ben said, as thickly as before:

"But what'd it do with the little girl? I'll kill the damned thing! I'll —"

Tom said bitterly:

"I forgot. She's all right."

Then Ben's eyes opened wide with shock. He shook his head to clear it. He stared at Tom, with the noise of men hunting over a couple of square miles all about him, and the excited noises of dogs, and many shoutings. Ben said slowly:

"The kid's all right? Then what are we hunting for?"

"I forgot about the kid," said Tom bitterly. "We found a man asleep and dead to the world with his clothes stripped off him. The thing's wearing those clothes! Dogs went crazy near the spot. I went back to the cabin — and the phone had been ringing for half an hour. Little Sally Clayton walked up to a house in Tateville an hour ago, and knocked on the door, and very politely asked for a slice of bread and butter and would they tell her father to come and get her? She says a funny man carried her to town. A nice funny man. She's unharmed. But she didn't travel fifteen miles by herself! The nice funny man carried her! She says he could run very, very fast. And here we're hunting him for nothing and he's got away. . . ." Tom's voice ended in weariness. "All right. I'll go stop the search."

He went stumbling away and Ben found his thinking hopelessly confused. The castaway had taken a child away, when it was deserted in the woods. But it hadn't harmed the child. And the child said it was a nice funny man. . . .

There began a shouting as the word was passed by bellowings that the little girl was safe in Tateville. One man shouted the news, and others bellowed questions, and gradually the tumult was stilled, and many men moved toward the cabin, talking in the wilderness.

When Ben reached the cabin, Tom was gone. He'd have gone instantly to Tateville. He'd become obsessed with the notion — which was probably a right one — that the castaway had to be found and killed, because he would regard humans as explorers have always regarded savages and lower forms of life. Tom had the convictions of the barbarian king of Mexico when the Spaniards appeared, and Opecancanough, and King Phillip and Pontiac

and Sitting Bull and ten thousand other long-dead defenders of their peoples against civilization. And Ben desolately shared a part of his convictions — but also he was sorry for any castaway on an alien world which hated him.

WHEN Ben reached the small town, there were knots of men talking everywhere. There were almost as many tales of little Sally's adventure as there were tellers, but none approached what Ben knew to be the truth. Some groups were satisfied that the little girl was found and unharmed. Others were convinced that a lynching was definitely in order. Some wavered between those convictions. Ben went to the newspaper office. His substitute was out, doubtlessly gathering the news of a lost little girl and her finding as a remarkably interesting story, when Ben knew that the real story was literally too strange to print.

He sat down in his working chair to figure things out. He was astonished to discover how weary he was. He was startled to realize that the hunt and the return to Tateville afterward had taken up so much of the day that it was now dusk. Dusk came early to Tateville, though, in its valley among high mountains. Ben sat in his darkening office and wryly tried to figure out a way to print the truth, so that it would be taken as the serious, urgent warning that it was. Outside the office, the many small sounds of the little town changed and quieted, though there remained the sound of voices.

The sky to westward, above the mountains, turned tawny-red. Through the office window, Ben could see the foliage on easterly slopes change color in that illumination. He smoked, groping for a way to print the story in the Tateville *Record* so that it would be picked up by the wire services, and checked on, and needful action taken. Ben couldn't contradict Tom Hartle's opinion, though he couldn't wholly agree now. But he did know that some action was needful. The castaway had to be made harmless to mankind. If that meant killing him, one could feel very sorry for him, but nevertheless he would have to be killed.

Night fell, and still Ben had no notion how to take care of the newsworthy fact that a wrecked space-craft had crashed into the mountains to the east of Tateville, that there had been one survivor, that the space-boat was now buried under a landslide — perhaps brought about by the surviving passenger — and that an alien, non-human creature was now at large on Earth. There was simply no way to make anybody believe it.

He struck a match and lighted

his pipe again. It was singularly restful too sit so, ordinarily. But now he was acutely unhappy. Yet it would do no good to make a light and stare at the walls of his office.

The door opened and a figure stood there.

"Mr. Lyon?"

Ben said:

"Yes. I'll make a light." He stirred.

"Don't," said the visitor. "I'll be needing my eyes presently. No need to dazzle them with light. I was in that hunt today, Mr. Lyon. There's some mystery there. The little girl was perfectly all right, but she says it was a funny man who brought her to town. A nice funny man. But she can't say what was funny about him. What do you make of that, Mr. Lyon?"

Ben said drily:

"If you'd like to hear the facts — as they were given to me, I can tell you." His visitor sat down in a chair he seemed able to find in the dark without any difficulty. He leaned back. Ben said, "You won't believe this, but —"

He told the story straight, as if it had been told so to him. It was an experiment, to see how a normal man would react to the narrative of the actual facts. It might give a clue to how he could tell the story convincingly. But as he went on he was wryly aware that he was telling it badly.

When he finished, his visitor said thoughtfully:

"Are you going to print it that way?"

"Would you believe it?" asked Ben. His pipe had gone out. He scratched another match to light it. The figure in the chair made an abrupt movement, and then was still. Ben saw his face dimly in the matchlight. His hand quivered slightly as he held the match over the pipe-bowl.

"Why — yes," said his visitor. "It's true, as far as it goes. In fact, I —" There was a pause. "I have been in touch with the castaway. I came here to tell you the story you just told me, with one addition."

Ben blew out the match, and tried to think whose voice he listened to. It was familiar, but he wasn't sure.

"The castaway," said the figure in the chair, "blundered on the man Clayton, who shot at him. The castaway threw a flame-pellet to frighten him away. It did. He left the little girl behind. And she was hysterical with terror at the sight of him. So he —" Another pause. "He used his mind to calm her. And he could look into her memories very easily. There was no need to — quiet her as the man Stub was quieted. The castaway was very bitter and desperate, just then. He had seen only three men at close quarters,

and all were ferocious creatures who tried to kill him. He believed that he would have to make himself a fortress, and weapons to defend himself against the murderous natives of this world. But from the little girl's memories he began to understand what human beings are really like."

Ben said — his mouth was queerly dry —

"What did he learn?"

"That men and his race are much alike. It would have to be so. As all birds, to fly, must have wings that are very similar, so beings to be intelligent must have intelligences that are very near in kind. The castaway can be friends with men. He can find companionship among men. He needs to have companionship. He cannot hope ever to leave Earth. If he is alone, he will go mad, like a man in solitude."

Ben said in a rusty voice:

"That's a message for me?"

"Yes," said the voice quietly. "The memories of the man Stub said that you were a good man. The memories of the child said the same, and also the memories of another man whom the castaway — quieted when he was discovered during the hunt for the lost child. So the castaway asks your help."

"To make friends among men," said Ben.

"Yes."

"He can't," said Ben grimly. "He is different from us, so we hate him. We bristle when we know he is near. He knows more than we do, so we fear him. When it is known that he exists on Earth, all of humanity will combine to hunt him down."

The voice said:

"Even you?"

"I am trying," said Ben defiantly, "to devise a way to make other men believe that he does exist. I am trying to arrange for the hunt for him to begin, so he will be killed!"

There was a long pause. Out in the darkness of the town, a dog yelped hysterically. Another dog snarled. There was a small growling murmur. The figure by the wall sat up straighter.

"You know," it said softly, "that I am the castaway."

"Of course I know!" said Ben fiercely. "And you can kill me! And I am very sorry for you, because you will be killed, — no matter how much you wish to be our friend — but there is nothing else to be done! You have to be killed because you are intelligent and are not a man!"

The voice said curiously:

"But you don't hate me —"

"I do," said Ben. His hands were clenched. "My scalp crawls at the thought of you sitting there and talking to me, and you not a man! But I will be sorry for you even while I try to kill you."

The sound of dogs was louder, and nearer. There was a growling as of a small but angry mob.

The figure stood up.

"I made a mask of clay," he said detachedly, "and I put on the clothes of a man. I shall have to make a better mask, and find out how to deceive dogs. I need to live among men. After all, I am a civilized being! I do not think your warned men will detect me. I learn quickly. I have already learned that noises like — that —" Dogs snarled furiously, not far away. "Noises like that mean that somebody is on my trail. So I will leave you."

The figure moved toward the door. Ben snatched at the drawer of his desk. There was a revolver inside. Instantly, it seemed, he was paralyzed.

The figure ran lightly out of the door, and Ben could move again. He seized the revolver and ran to the door. He saw dark figures approaching, with the dogs yapping and snarling and hysterical among them.

"Hurry!" shouted Ben from the doorway, waving the revolver urgently. "Come on! He's running that way —"

He was in the thick of the running mass of men as they swarmed past his office. They ran among trees. They plunged past the houses and the shrubbery and the garages and the tool-sheds of the residences of Tateville. Once they heard a woman scream, and plunged toward the sound and found her in a dead faint. The town became a swarming, deadly man-hunt — or creature-hunt. There was one dog which seemed to have greater courage than the rest. It ran ahead of the others, and they heard it screaming and snarling its hatred of something that fled before it. The men took that dog as their guide. The unseen fugitive doubled back through the other end of town. The men made a short cut in the darkness to overtake it.

Ben found himself uttering beastly cries of fury as he ran. And he was one of those who saw the castaway as it emerged into the starlight just beyond the town, where a bridge ran over the small swift stream on which Tateville depended for water. The screaming of an infuriated dog ran with it — but there was no dog. And Ben knew that just as the castaway had learned to talk like men, it had also learned to scream like an hysterical dog, and it was leading the pursuit where it wished.

Guns exploded luridly. The range was long. But the running figure wavered, and limped, and lurched — and went over the bridge-rail into the stream.

Then Ben found himself coldly composed and desperately de-

jected. Because this was plainly the plan of the castaway. The stream ran swift and even fairly deep. A man could drown in it. Especially a wounded man.

But the castaway was not a man, and Ben doubted profoundly that it was wounded. He knew that raging men, with dogs, would follow the stream down, hunting a body or a trail of a wounded man staggering out of it. He suspected that they would come finally to the conclusion that a dead body lay in an eddy of some one of the stream's pools, and perhaps they would find scraps of rags to buttress their conviction that the fugitive was dead. But he was sure that they would never actually find a body. And he was quite sure that they would never suspect or believe that they had not chased some unknown man — some maniac, perhaps — who had wandered among the wilds and essayed a monstrous crime and had properly been hunted to his death for it.

In this, of course, he was quite right. But he was the only man in the world who held that view and had that knowledge. Later that same night, when Tom Hartle came to him with triumph in his expression because the castaway was dead, Ben tried to convince him that the castaway was very much alive.

"He's dead," said Tom Hartle positively. "I saw him drop into the stream. He'd never live through the rocks downstream! Nobody could! We can forget it now, Ben. Nobody'd have believed that he came from somewhere out among the stars, but he had to be killed. And he has been!" Then he said relievedly. "We can go on that fishing-trip now, Ben."

But Ben didn't go. He wanted to think things over. He knew the castaway was still alive, and he felt very sorry for him, but he knew he should be killed. But he didn't know how to convince anybody that such a creature existed. He told a fiction-writer about it, once, but the writer said he didn't believe it. He made a story about it, but nobody took it seriously.

Ben almost persuaded himself that the castaway had been truthful when he said he had no hope of escape from Earth or of being able to signal his kin. Then, one day, something disturbing occurred to him. No matter how many brains the castaway picked around Tateville, he wouldn't be apt to get any clear idea of atom bombs, or that the material for atomic fuel could be had on Earth. But the castaway might learn about such matters away from Tateville. And knowledge of atomic fuel to be had on Earth might give the alien hope of escape back to his native world. And he might tell his kindred

about the interesting savages he'd found where he'd been cast away. Which would be the beginning of the end, for humanity.

Ben's been worrying a lot since the appearance of that curious disease at Los Alamos and Hanford, Washington. It's thought to be caused by radiation. Every so often a key technician, or one of the authorities on atomic theory, is found sleeping heavily. His pulse is normal. His breathing is deep. There is absolutely nothing wrong with him that can be detected. He wakes up after about twenty-four hours and only remembers a creepy sensation as preceding the attack, and a sensation of cold at the temples.

There've been less than a dozen cases of the disease so far. Curiously, every one has been a man with top-secret information.

Ben doesn't sleep well, these nights. He's worrying.

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## DID MU EXIST AFTER ALL?

For decades scientists have been sneering at evidence for the lost continent of Mu, presumably sunk beneath the Pacific waves. "Just a pipe dream of James Churchward," they have exclaimed. "There is no evidence that Mu ever existed."

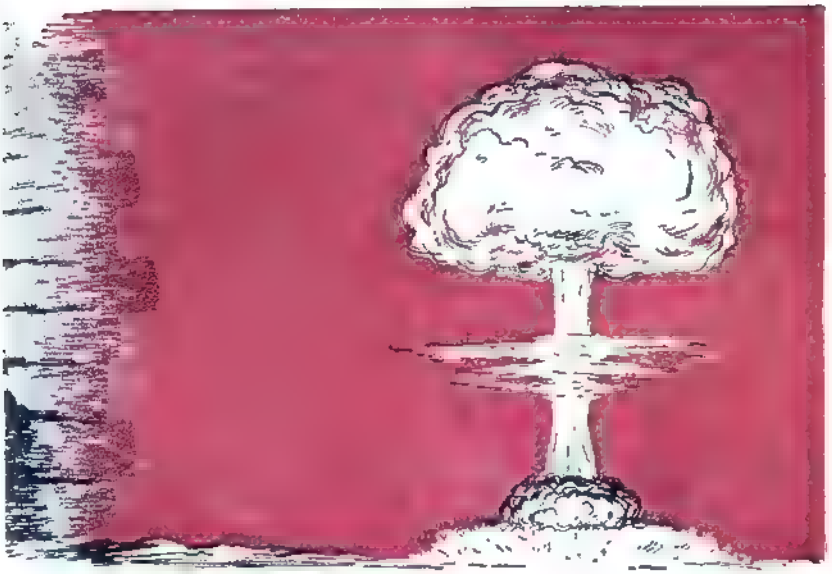
Official scientific dogma is that the fair Pacific islands were uninhabited until the Polynesians came along in relatively recent times — and they were quite obviously modern men related to the Indo-European peoples with Malayan mixtures in the north and Melanesian mixtures in the south.

Last winter Dr. I. Hamilton Beattie, archeologist of Suva, Fiji Islands, upset this scientific applecart with a revolutionary discovery of paleolithic implements on Pitcairn Island, home of the Bounty mutineers. Five ancient stone implements — two adzes, two borers, and a mallet, were dug up on Pitcairn.

Here's what the discovery means — that old stone age people must have been living on Pitcairn Island as long as 15,000 years ago. Yet this little island was completely uninhabited when the Bounty mutineers arrived in 1790. Where did the original inhabitants go? It seems likely that Pitcairn was a fragment of a larger island which sank beneath the waves of the Pacific, carrying with it a vanished race, unknown to the later Polynesians. The stone implements are similar to those found in Tasmania and China.

# DOWN WILL COME THE SKY

by NELSON BOND



**All of us have had that "I have been here before" sensation, and Randall was no exception, only — he's going to be ready next time.**

TAKE paramnesia, for instance," said Frank Andrews of the *Call*.

"Not I," said Bob Jamieson. "I'm allergic to words of four syllables. *You* take it, Art."

"No, thank you," said Hartman placidly. "I'll take another Scotch and soda. Roscoe —"

He lifted fingers at the bartender. Roscoe grinned and clinked bottles. We all grinned; even Frank. That's the nice thing about the Press Club. The conversation gets progressively zanier and more insulting as the hour grows later and the drinks more authoritative, but nobody ever gets sore at anyone else. Really, that is.

During the evening we had drifted from a discussion of flying saucers to a survey of occult phenomena in general, finally reaching the question of prescience, on which Andrews proceeded to discourse with astonishing clarity, considering the number of bourbon and waters he had consumed.

"Paramnesia," Frank persisted.

"The '*I have been here before*' feeling. We've all had it one time or another. Psychologists call it illusion. What actually happens, they say, is this: A man enters a situation, in the course of which he suffers a brief syncope — perhaps caused by fatigue. This mental blackout lasts only a fraction of a second, so when the brain cuts in again the man doesn't *know* that for a moment he was unconscious. He thinks he is encountering for the first time a set of circumstances which somehow, somewhere, he met before.

"He is right. He *was* there before — a split second ago. The shutoff interval was so short that as 'once again' he sees exactly what he was seeing at the moment it began — the waving hand, the pouring tea, the falling star. He hears, as if in memory, the unfinished sentence, the unbroken bar of music.

"And that," shrugged Frank, "is the simple explanation of the phenomenon we call paramnesia, or *déjà vu*."

Newspaper men are realists. They like things clear, simple, logical. Around the circle heads nodded in approval. Until the stranger spoke up.

"An interesting theory," he said. "There's only one thing wrong with it."

"Namely?" demanded Frank.

"Namely this," said the stranger. "It's not true."

He was a quiet sort of person, gray in apparel, appearance and manner. Even his flat contradiction of Frank's explanation was gentle, without challenge. He was neither flippant nor argumentative. His statement was as grayly commonplace as himself.

Nevertheless, Frank was a friend, this fellow an outsider. So automatically we rallied to Andrews' support. Ed Townsend of the *Times* drawled, "Very interesting, Mr. —"

"Randall," said the gray man. "Herbert Randall. I take it none of you remember me?"

There was an immediate stirring of interest. I did not *remember* Bert Randall, having never seen him before in my life, but I sure as hell knew who he was. As did every man in the room. Randall was one of those fabulous characters: a newsman's newsman; a synthesis of all the finer qualities of Richard Harding Davis and Ernie Pyle and William Allen White with none of that trio's flaws; a foreign correspondent with a roving assignment from the press association he represented; twice winner of the Pulitzer award. That sort of guy.

You could almost hear the clanking of mental gears as the majority of us abruptly shifted allegiance. Nor were we greatly embarrassed by our defection, for Andrews himself was making tiny, strangled noises of retraction some-

where in the background.

Then Randall said an amazing thing.

"I take it none of you remember me," he said sadly, "but *I* know most of *you*. Hawley, Townsend, Andrews —" His eyes roved our fireside circle — "Cohen, Mitchell, Hartman —"

Jamieson gasped, "Good God, man — what are you? A mind reader?"

Randall smiled faintly. "Not at all."

"But you — a stranger here — reeling off our names like that —"

"You *have* been away, haven't you?" asked Sam Cohen. "We read your stories from Korea."

"Yes," said Randall, "and no."

"Eh?"

"Apparently I've been away," conceded Randall, with a strangely speculative glance at his pale fingers dangling a cigarette. "Obviously this — this *being* named Herbert Randall was in Korea this time last week. And before that, in Japan.

"But the essential *I* — or at least some part of me — did not yesterday step down from a transcontinental airliner. I know your names because —" He drew a deep breath — "because we have been friends for many years. Last Tuesday night we sat together in this same room. Does that make sense?"

No voice disturbed an abruptly uncomfortable silence. Randall's hands trembled slightly, and the smoke of his cigarette spun blue-brown spirals to the ceiling. Then the gray man spoke again.

"No," he said. "No, I suppose it doesn't. Because it wasn't really *you*, any more than the Randall you see before you is really *I*. Those other people are no longer in existence. They ceased to be last Sunday afternoon when, shortly after 3:15 o'clock — I destroyed their world."

I DON'T expect you to believe this (said Randall), because it didn't happen to you. But it is the truth. Of all people alive today, I alone am of a world that was destroyed. *You* are all living in your proper time. *I* lived on a time-track that once was, and now is not.

You glance at each other. I don't blame you. You think I am insane — and you may be right. But listen to my story, then judge for yourselves.

Consider Time. Do you know what Time is? If not, I'd like to give you my idea.

Think of a tree. Its trunk grows straight to a certain point, then from this node splits into two boles. Later, these two trunks diverge again. And again. So they continue endlessly to separate and divide, first into branches, then into limbs and twigs, finally into stems and buds and leaves.

Time, I conceive, is such a

treelike structure. It started from a common root and source; it has now branched and subdivided so often that in the infinite universe there exist as many possible worlds as there are leaflets on a tree.

I think a tree's dividing points are matched, in mankind's history, by decision points: important moments in Time when a critical decision was made. Perhaps one such point was that at which the first curious lungfish flopped to the shore of a primeval sea and dared the great experiment of venturing onto land. Another may have been when some hairy primate first rose from all fours to walk erect, freeing his hands for more important tasks.

Moses on Sinai, Achilles before Troy, Caesar at the Rubicon — these are historic records of such nodes. There are countless others. Each was a point in Time at which someone made a vital decision. And from each dividing point sprang a separate history of mankind — a new, unique, completely independent world.

These possible worlds — the worlds of *If* — co-exist. They are separate branches on the tree of Time, having equal reality. But we can no more know of them than the leaves on the sun side of a tree can have awareness of the leaves in the shade. Each sprout thinks it alone has reality. This is the great delusion of mankind. For other sprouts exist. In fact, other *worlds* exist.

I know this. I know it with a dreadful certainty. Because I am the child of one such world.

RANDALL paused. Townsend said thoughtfully, "Parallel worlds? I've heard the theory before. But it *is* only a theory, of course."

"A theory once proved," said Randall, "becomes a fact. And I can prove that what I say is true. Let me ask a question. When you encounter this experience of *déjà vu*, how do you feel?"

"Dazed," said Townsend. "Bewildered and confused."

"Quite so. And how do you *act*?"

"Well — helplessly. As if I were moving on a treadmill, caught in the grip of some force over which I have no control. I know exactly what I'm going to say and do, but I can't stop myself. Of course I can't speak for others —"

"It is the same for all. At such moments, we feel as if our acts are forcordained. But this, too, is illusion. For in each man's life, such moments are the great decision points."

SUCH moments (repeated Randall), are the great decision points. *I* believe we foresee their coming. Far in advance of actuality we become aware — how, I cannot guess — that before us lies an important decision. Thus we

are given ample time to study the problem and decide on a solution. This is prescience.

Then, after days or months or years, we come to that critical point. Confusion dulls our faculties, and so we act in accordance with our subconsciously precalculated decisions. Yet even as we do so, our numbed minds labor with the thought, '*This is not new to me. I have been here before.*'

That, I believe, is why during such moments we feel as if we were being borne by a swift, irresistible tide. But that current is *not* irresistible. It is possible to change our actions at these points. I know this, because I have accomplished it.

I have told you I am not of your time. That is so. But I was born in your year 1904, and for many years thereafter was your contemporary. Reverting to my tree analogy, I am a leaf on one stem, you are leaves from another. But we sprang from a common branch. Thus my early memories are identical with yours. We shared the same world to a decision point — then we diverged. The histories of your world and mine were the same to a certain year.

That year was 1945.

At five o'clock in the morning on the sixteenth day of July in that year I reached a decision point. That dawn I stood with a tense group of scientists and military men in a concrete shelter on the desert near Los Alamos. I was the only newsman in that group, selected to represent the press pool. But only for the purpose of future record. For the present I was pledged to strictest secrecy — for in a moment was to be discharged the first atomic blast ever released by man.

Now, how it happened that *I* was chosen as the one actually to press the button detonating the distant bomb was just one of those things. Every man present had a better right than I to the distinction. By tradition, one of the military leaders should have tested the new superweapon. Each of the scientists had contributed greatly in time and effort to this moment. Perhaps it was *because* selection amongst them was so difficult that I was granted the honor. At any rate, when preparations had been made and checked, a multi-starred general turned to me.

"Randall," he said, "you are a newsman, and this is the greatest news story of all time. So *you* touch it off."

As simply as that was I appointed to press the button symbolizing man's mastery over the elements. I moved to the control panel and placed my finger on the red stud.

It was then that I reached my decision point. As I stood there, poised and tense, suddenly into

my mind swirled the thought, "*I have been here before.*" I felt that sense of lost futility which Townsend described as a treadmill helplessness. I heard, as in a half-remembered dream, the muted whispers and throat-clearings of my companions, saw the thin red finger of the sweep-second hand gliding toward its fateful destination, felt a swift, damp perspiration on my brow, the cold smoothness of the button beneath my finger, the clammy tingling of my viscera.

I knew I was about to do something I dreaded. Briefly the thought occurred to me, "*I don't* have *to do this. I can refuse* —"

Then the second hand was a vertical line, a voice cried, "*Now!*" Convulsively my finger rammed the stud. And a blinding man-made sun glazed the distant sands in the instant before trembling earth sprouted a greasy fungus to the skies.

JAMIESON said, "*You* touched off the first atom bomb, Randall? I never knew that. All the records —"

"The wrong records," said Randall. "Records of *your* world, *your* Time. I am telling you the story of another world. I touched off the first A-bomb in a world you've never known."

THE pressing of that button (said Randall), was the dividing point between your world and mine. Now I will tell you of that other world of If. A world which I inhabited for six long dreadful years. From the moment I touched off the bomb, its history differs from the one you know. It would require volumes to tell all. I will give you only a few salient points

There was no Hiroshima in that other history. Somehow word leaked out that we had perfected an atom bomb. A man I will not name, for in *your* time he is honored and respected, was approached by certain parties. He sold our cherished secret. The Japanese, forewarned and armed, built up an A-bomb stockpile of their own. Twenty-four hours after our first raid had ravaged Tokyo, their retaliation made flaming pyres of New York, Washington, Los Angeles. A stalemated America and Japan settled down to three years of horror in the first atomic war mankind had known.

Neither side won. No victory was possible. When both sides were too exhausted to fight any longer, a peace was sought on terms acceptable to each combatant, and on the 19th of August, 1948, an armistice was signed.

By that time, world economy had collapsed. America was a land harassed by shortages, inflation, rationing — the general breakdown of a culture whose re-

*The phone rang—three, four, five times. Then it stopped.*

sources have been poured wastrelly into an all-out war. We had lost more than seven million lives, most of them civilian. Many of our once proud cities lay in ruin, the others were shabby shadows of their pre-war glory. Everywhere was hunger, weariness, despair.

All this was bad. The worst was yet to come.

In the spring of 1949 began trickling into clinics the first DRD victims. This was the name we gave the Deferred Radiation Disease. I won't describe its symptoms. I will say only this: no case ever recovered. Perhaps, in view of the effects, it was better so. . . .

The disease spread swiftly. The trickle became a stream, the stream a torrent, the torrent a swelling tide that neither surgery nor drugs could halt. All the medical experts could do was make the sufferers as comfortable as possible — for a while — then see that they had opiates at the end.

The plague struck America first, then spread, borne everywhere by the dust in the air, the waters of the seas that had been contaminated by our atom bombs. In *your* Time you have seen a tepid sample of what happened to us. After atom bomb tests in the American west, radioactive snow fell in Chicago and Pittsburgh. So it was with us — on a

greater scale. The winds that circled our world carried death and destruction. By the spring of '51, two hundred millions had died. A tenth of the world's population. And the end was not in sight.

But enough of such memories. Let me come to the end of that era. The ending which *I* brought about. . . .

On that Tuesday night which is parallel in Time to last Tuesday night in *your* world, I sat in this room and talked to your counterparts. Many, that is; not all. Does that surprise you? It should not. Of course you were newsmen in that world as well as this. You have been members of this club since before 1945, haven't you? Oh, in that other Time some of you worked for different papers. I, myself, had an entirely different history. For instance, since 1947 I had worked here in New York — which is why I know your names

Understand, I did not know then of your world. Like you, I thought the world in which I lived the only existence. But last Sunday — day before yesterday — occurred that which changed everything. I refused to answer the telephone.

"You *what?*" frowned Sam Cohen.

"I didn't answer the phone," repeated Randall. "And by failing to do so simple an act — I destroyed a world."

If the Fates were logical creatures (Randall mused), great changes would hinge on great events. But they are gray old ladies, whimsical and capricious.

Last Sunday afternoon I was lounging in my apartment, reading the paper, listening to the radio. I had just lighted a cigarette when the phone rang. And in that instant, once again I felt that eerie recognition, "*I have been here before.*"

As in a dream I saw my hand reach for the instrument. I knew with a dreadful certainty what was going to happen. I knew that in a moment I would answer, "*Hello?*" and hear a voice reply in words as yet unknown — but words I would "remember" the moment I heard them.

And with equal suddenness — how can we analyze the speed of thought? — I knew I did not *want* this to happen!

All in the flash of an instant it came to me that mankind's failures spring from his inability to change the pattern of life at moments of decision. I recalled that moment six years earlier on the sandy wastes of New Mexico. Since then I had often wondered what might have happened if I had refused to push that button. Something quite different, I knew. For life is an endless chain of cause and effect, stimulus and reaction. One second's hesitation by myself, six years before, might

have averted the atomic war, DRD, millions of deaths.

And now, I felt, another chance was offered me to remold mankind's future. What might be the result of *not* answering the phone, I did not know. But I dared dream it would not, *could* not, be worse than the fate presently endured by man.

All this in the split second while I was reaching for the phone. The flash of insight, the rebellion, the reaction. From somewhere deep within myself I dredged an unsuspected strength. And it required strength, mental and physical, to break those cobweb bonds. My hands trembled over the telephone, my lips already framed the prepared response. But I fought my lips and hands, drew back my groping fingers.

The phone rang — three, four, five times. Then it stopped. I felt a sudden sense of release like the breaking of a wire. I could almost hear the snapping *spang!* of its separation.

Then a dark vertigo struck me. A blinding giddiness lifted and whirled me out of myself, out of that quiet room, out to the farthest stars and back again. Again illusion, no doubt, but for a moment my heart, my breathing, seemed to stop. I closed my eyes in a swift access of pain and fear. Then I opened them again . . .

I was not in that room. I was not even the same man I had been. I was a different Herbert Randall, on my way home to New York from Korea, bearing dispatches dealing with a conflict in a world I'd never known!

MITCHELL broke in, "But you can't be a *different* Randall! You have a complete memory of that other world."

"Yes. And also a complete memory of the life and activities of the Herbert Randall I have become. I think I am a sort of synthesis. A duality. When I destroyed my own world by erasing its possibility, somehow I merged with the Randall I *might* have been."

"Erasing its possibility?" repeated Townsend.

"That must be what happened," nodded Randall. "That is the only explanation I can offer. I think that when I refused to answer that phone I broke the chain which gave my old world its validity. I cancelled the equation, ended that time-track's possibility. And so — the time-track died."

"But how about you? *You* survived."

"I don't know how or why. Perhaps because I was the indispensable factor. Perhaps each individual is the indispensable factor during his personal moments of paramnesia.

"At any rate, when I found

myself a new Randall, I discovered I had inherited the memories of that Randall for the past six years. And I know, now, why your world and mine differed. It is because a half dozen years before, this Herbert Randall rebelled in the shelter at Los Alamos. Where it had but briefly occurred to my other self to refuse pressing the button, I *did* refuse. At the moment of decision, I turned away. There was an instant of confusion. Then the commanding officer thrust me aside and pressed the stud himself — a split second later. That interval was the difference between two possible worlds.

"That is why your histories do not credit me with touching off the first atomic blast. I refused. Only the courtesy of those present has, till now, concealed the story of my failure."

Jamieson asked slowly, "And the conclusion? Now that you have seen what *we* have done during these past six years, do you consider your alternate decision a success?"

Randall stared at him soberly.

"What do you think?"

"I'm asking you."

"Very well. I'll say this much: yours is a *better* world than that other. But still you've made a frightful mess of things. You won a victory, then let it slip from your grasp. You have permitted a new antagonist, more dangerous than the old, to overrun half your world. Even now you face the same kind of war that wrecked our civilization. You have but years, or months, or days to go before *your* cities flame with atomic fires, your people waste away in the radiation disease.

"Yours is a *better* world, but not a good one. Like mine, perhaps it were well ended. Somewhere on the tree of Time must be a world where men have learned to live in amity and peace. Where human hearts are warm with friendliness."

Randall's gray eyes were curiously opaque, as if he were not seeing us at all, but looking deep within himself.

"Finding such a world," he whispered softly, "would warrant the destruction of a dozen such as this. Or a thousand. And when one knows how the trick is done —"

Ed Townsend quoted in a curious, strained voice:

*"Good creatures, do you love your lives*
*And have you ears for sense?*
*Here is a knife like other knives,*
*That cost me eighteen pence.*

*I need but stick it in my heart*
*And down will come the sky,*
*And earth's foundations will depart*
*And all you folk will die."*

"Something like that," nodded Randall. "Yes, something very much like that. Because —" He

spoke almost apologetically — "because it wouldn't *hurt* you, you know. You would simply cease to exist."

Winky Peters rose. He had been restless for some moments; now he rose and offered his hand to Herbert Randall.

"Pal," he said, "congratulations!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've heard some experts in my time. But you're the tops! I never heard such a convincing goddamned lie in all my life."

Randall stiffened. Faint color tinged his cheekbones. He said, "That's what you think of my story?"

"What did you expect? After all, we're intelligent adults. That is, we're supposed to be."

"Yes," said Randall. "Supposed to be." He glanced around the circle awkwardly, hopelessly, then rose and moved toward the door. "Well, gentlemen, I — I'll say goodnight."

When he had gone, Jamieson turned on Winky.

"That was a hell of a thing to say!" he fumed. "The biggest name in American newspaper circles — and you call him a liar! Have you got rocks in your head?"

"Pebbles," said Winky cheerfully, "compared to the ones in *his*. Bert Randall may be kingpin in the profession, but if he believes that stuff he was peddling tonight, he's eligible for a private suite in the Napoleon factory."

He waited for the laughs. When he got none:

"What's the matter with you guys?" he demanded in an aggrieved tone. "Don't you know a rib when you hear one? Hey! Don't tell me any of you were sucker enough to *believe* him?"

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to cry yes, I *do* believe every terrible last word of it. I believe other worlds can exist, *do* exist, and that for some years of his life Bert Randall dwelt in such a world. I wanted to say he's right, dreadfully right. We *are* hurtling down a pathway to destruction. We *are* a leaf that will wither and die and fall, and there is no salvation for us.

But you don't say things like that. Not to men you work with every day. So I joined in the general laughter and denial. I suggested a fresh round of drinks.

"Roscoe!" I said.

The bartender got busy. The tinkle of ice in glass was comforting, reassuring. Only Townsend continued to brood.

"There's just one thing," he said. "There's this one thing you've overlooked. Suppose he gets *another* chance? Suppose he tries again — for a better world? What will happen to *us*?"

"Roscoe!" I called fretfully. "Hurry up with those drinks!"

**Space Transport Command was being so helpful that Intersol couldn't move a ship until they found a counter to the "Kill 'em with kindness" move.**

It was midmorning on Mars when Jay Murray climbed down the ladder steps from the space ship to the floor of Space Transport Command's passenger docks. At the foot of the ladder he turned, still lithe and muscular for all his forty years, toward the ramp leading to the admission depot. The place was familiar to him from other visits, and he hurried along with the others to get to the checking desks.

There weren't many passengers because Military Control still held a tight lid upon interplanetary travel. Along with himself, most of the passengers seemed to know where they were going; and from the expressions on their faces, they seemed to know what to expect.

Jay hoped there would be none of the usual mixups on his own papers, but he also knew it was a pretty far fetched desire. Anything the military handles —

He chuckled to himself in realization that the military prob-

# BOW DOWN TO THEM

by MARK CLIFTON

ably felt the same way toward private companies; and, these days, particularly toward Intersol Corporation. If those officers of STC on Earth Base had learned of his overnight trip out to Mars, the military personnel here would be feeling especially hostile toward Intersol's Personnel Director, one Jay Murray.

He surrendered his one allowable bag to the proper desk for weighing, searching, fumigating. Of course this had all been done on Earth before he left, but this was the military. It would be done again.

As soon as that clerk had droned through his declaration, Jay walked over to the short line which had already formed in front of the admission desk, and stood prepared for a long wait. From his position, he could look out the plastic window at the dull and uninteresting scenery, the gray lichen on the ground, the low red hills in the distance. It was as bleak as the waiting room where he stood.

But not uninteresting there in the foreground was that long line of X-62's, twenty-six interplanetary ships grounded here on Mars. Another military snafu, and blamed, of course, on Intersol.

Jay hoped the petty officer who was checking the arrivals up ahead would not connect his visit with those ships. After what happened in the office yesterday, they'd find some reason at the last minute to deny him entrance if they knew.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Up ahead the arrival clerk was still engrossed with the first passenger. He was going through all the papers, item by item, as if he had never seen them before — as if the same thing hadn't been done on Earth before departure.

Oh well, why grouse about it?

Frankly when Hammond had called him into the office yesterday, he hadn't expected to wind up on Mars today. But that was the space transport business. One never knew.

He waited. He moved up the line a notch. One down, six to go before they reached him.

He had thought over that scene in the company President's office a dozen times, trying to see if there wasn't some other idea he could get out of it, just in case his plan didn't work.

But it had to work! There wasn't anything else he could depend upon except his knowledge of what makes people tick, how to get along with the military mind. But if there was a hitch? His secretary had promised she would get through to Washington at all costs. And what Sara promised she'd do, she did.

Still, the flow of the scene occupied his mind again while he waited.

Jay saw himself back at Intersol's Home base again, on the belt carrier moving him swiftly over the intervening blocks from the Personnel Department and up through the levels of their plant toward the executive offices of the company.

At this hour there were few of the twenty thousand employees using the belts, but he saw a sprinkling of couriers, expeditors, and department heads traveling from one place to another.

The couriers looked curiously in his direction, and some of them tried out a smile, hoping they weren't stepping over the bounds of propriety with such a big wheel. He answered their smiles with a grin and a wink, knowing it made them into instantly loyal supporters. The messengers got kicked around by everybody, the least he could do was encourage them a bit.

The expeditors lifted a grave finger in greeting, and were relieved, by his equally grave nod of acknowledgement, to know he realized their importance and the seriousness of their problems.

The department heads called out worried questions to him as they met and passed on opposing belts, and held their portable tape recorder keys open for his answers which they might need for future authority.

Inwardly, Jay reacted automatically, with an ease of long practice. This was all in the day's work. But it struck his wry sense of humor that this new batch of tapes they were using were red in color.

Oh well, in such a vast organization, spread from Saturn's moons to Venus, he supposed red tape was necessary — somewhat — perhaps.

In the general administration offices various receptionists saw him coming and responded to his signal by routing his belt, narrowed now, toward the offices of the President of the Company. The Assistant Secretary touched a code signal to the Executive Secretary's office, and Jay had only an instant to wait at the end of the belt where it disappeared into the floor.

The executary opened his door, and Jay strode through.

"Morning, Pete," he said. "His nibs is expecting me."

"I know," Pete said crisply. "He told me. Try not to take up too much of his time. He has important conferences scheduled." Then because that was a little too crisp and pointed, even for Pete, he softened it. "I've been trying to get him to slow down." He pushed irritably at one contact lens which was irritating his eye.

"You and my secretary ought to get together," Jay grinned to show he had taken no offense. "Sara's always hounding me to do the same."

In spite of himself, the Executary allowed a faint smile to form briefly on his thin lips.

"I suppose the Personnel office does have its problems also," he conceded, as he walked over to the other side of the room. It was was if he had never considered the point before.

"About twenty thousand of them," Jay answered. "That is, if you limit one to a customer. Usually the employees seem to exceed their quota."

"Grouping and routine," Pete mumbled. "Correlating and collating —"

"Regulation and red tape," Jay countered with a grin. "But I'm old fashioned. I still consider employees to be human beings, to be dealt with on the human level instead of the statistical."

"I suppose you know your business," Pete said doubtfully. "At least you seem to get along all right. Well, every man to his own methods."

He dismissed the subject with a shrug to indicate that he would handle it quite differently, and Jay shuddered at the thought of all the Personnel Directors who agreed with him — and the turmoil of labor trouble they caused. Statistical analyses were wonderful, provided each person was allowed to feel he was the exception. He shrugged the thought away also, as Pete opened the door to the President's office.

"Mr. Murray to see you, Mr. Hammond," Pete spoke crisply.

"Come in, Jay." The company President looked up from the solar system map he was considering. Then he saw his secretary still hesitating at the door.

"What is it, Pete? What now?" he asked.

"I thought I'd better remind you, sir." Pete began reciting in a routine voice, but it arose on each item until it approached a wail. "There is a delegation from the planning board waiting now. There will be a visitation in seven minutes from the Space Admiral's office. There is a Moonport call to return, requiring your personal attention. There is an awake tape of ten minutes you've just got to listen to, immediately. And I might mention you are a full night behind on your sleep tape."

"Okay, okay, Pete," Hammond groaned wearily. "Shut the door. Handle things the best way you can."

"But the Admiralty, sir. You must be ready for them. They are not accustomed to waiting, sir." Pete was mentally wringing his hands, and not far away from it physically.

"Shut the door, Pete," Hammond repeated, even more wearily. He waved Jay to a foamchair with his hand

"Oh dear," Pete moaned as he shut the door. Hammond turned to Jay.

"Maintenance been to see you yet this morning?" he asked.

"I think they're my next appointment, Bill," Jay answered. "Why?"

"I'll tell you what it's about," Hammond said shortly. His square face and iron gray hair made him the perfect picture of an executive, but the drawn lines of weariness and gray texture of his skin made him a tired old man. "They're going to ask for an increase in personnel for their department. Every time anybody has a problem in this company, they think the only way to solve it is to hire more people. You'd think they were working for the government." His voice was almost querulous in its weariness and frustration.

Jay felt a surge of deep concern for his boss

"Let's get basic, Bill," he said. "Just what is the problem, really?"

Hammond stared at Jay under heavy gray brows and pressed his blunt fingers into his desk top.

"It's this Interspace Transport Command," he answered grudgingly. "The latest flash is that we now have twenty-two ships tied up at Marsport. Grounded for repairs. I can't find out why." Jay started to comment, and Hammond dropped his brows lower into a scowl.

"Don't say it, Jay," he rumbled. "I know you opposed bidding on this contract with Space Transport Command from the start. Well — I'll admit it — you've proved to be right. I wish I'd listened to you. But it's too late now. We're in it, and unless we can break the bottlenecks somehow, that little contract is going to break Intersol."

"Break Intersol!" Jay exclaimed, and whistled. "Bad as that, eh? I knew it would be a nuisance and we'd lose money on it, but I thought it would be a drop in the bucket as compared with our regular passenger and freight lines."

"It ought to be just a drop in the bucket," Hammond flashed back. "It ought to be. But it's turned into red tape, red tape, protocol, conferences with brass and braid, directives, authorizations, directives and more directives until I can't see straight. All on that little penny ante four flights a day to Jupiter and Saturn. Heaven help me from ever getting mixed up with the military again."

Jay sighed and settled back in his foamchair.

"Okay, Bill," he said. "You've finally got it off your chest. Let's consider I've said I told you so. That's out of the way. Now what are we going to do about it?"

Hammond lifted his brows, and let a twinkle show behind his brown eyes.

"Never carry a grudge, do you, Jay? Never try to rub it in." He was almost smiling now. "If somebody shot a flasher at you, and

the backlash burnt his fingers, you'd be the first one there to bandage them."

Jay was relieved that his boss had forgiven him for opposition to the contract, but he merely shrugged.

"It's the personnel habit," he tossed it away. "Employees can't seem to help getting into trouble. Somebody has to stand by with the bandages."

"I wish somebody would stand by at Marsport," Hammond grumbled.

"I suppose I could run out to Mars again," Jay answered reluctantly. He didn't want to go, but his department was running smoothly, and this seemed serious.

"Could you, Jay?" Hammond asked quickly, and his face seemed to relax. "I hated like hell to ask you, because it's a maintenance problem. But dammit, the Maintenance Super has been there for a week and hasn't made any headway."

"It's probably a personnel problem, too," Jay said resignedly. "Sooner or later, everything boils down to the human factor. You just can't get away from it." Then he looked at Hammond with narrowed eyes. "But that's not basic, Bill. There's something wrong. Something I don't know about. Intersol has as good an organization as any company in the world. Triplanet handled this contract before, with no apparent trouble."

Hammond bit his lips and flushed slightly. He beetled his brows again and seemed to consider before he spoke. Then he seemed to make up his mind.

"I pulled a boner in signing the contract, Jay. They said there might be a few changes in operations to be recommended at the local level, but they would be minor. I went ahead and signed."

"So?" Jay asked.

"So when the little changes came in," Hammond answered grimly, "they turned into a landslide of red tape which made profitable operation completely hopeless. I said in the contract I would comply with all directives. The directives keep piling in."

"I know," Jay answered. "I've had my share. Ridiculous things, too. Mountainous piles of paper work with no practical application whatsoever."

"My sleep tape is loaded with them every night," Hammond went on. "I —"

The crystal glass of the desk intercom showed pink, then began flashing emergency red. Hammond flipped the switch with irritation.

"Yes, Pete. What is it?"

"The Admiralty, Mr. Hammond," Pete said crisply. "has been waiting now for thirty seven seconds. The Admiralty is not accustomed —"

Jay signalled Hammond and stepped into viewer range.

"What is the top rank, Pete?" he asked.

"A Commander, Mr. Murray," Pete answered.

"Washington? Or local level?"

"Local."

"Keep them waiting another few seconds."

Hammond looked at Jay questioningly as he flipped the cutoff.

"I'd like to sit in, if you don't mind," Jay requested. Hammond thought for an instant.

"Okay," he said. He flipped the key open again. "Send them in, Pete."

Five stomachless men paraded through the door, hawkfaced and distant eyed. There were no smiles among them, and they conveyed the feeling that no one could ever know them as human beings. Their remoteness was the remoteness of space itself. Their black uniforms was its blackness, and their irridescent braid was its starshine.

Pete followed them in and nervously pulled conference chairs into place before he edged out the door and shut it behind him.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" Hammond opened the conversation when they were all seated The foamchairs were built for relaxation, but their poses suggested they were ready to endure electrical shock at any instant without a quiver.

The Commander's voice was as rigid as his position.

"We wish to enter protest on the inefficiency of Intersol's operation of Space Transport Command fleet," he said crisply.

Hammond's face showed an instant of unholy joy before it settled into his favorite poker player expression.

"Gentlemen," he said concisely, "I quote: 'Section 2, Article 17, Paragraph 6. To wit: Should Space Transport Command find it necessary to enter formal protest on the inefficiency of Intersol's operations of this fleet, then the contract is subject to immediate cancellation.' End quote!"

He paused for an instant, and then looked fixedly at the Commander.

"I take it, gentlemen, you have come prepared to file notice of cancellation?"

It was the thin lipped Captain, at the side of the Commander, who answered him.

"You will note, sir," he clipped his words rapidly, "That the contract specifies 'formal protest'. You will also note that the Commander did not employ the word 'formal'. Therefore, sir, we give you no grounds for applying for cancellation — merely major penalty assignment." It was the pedantic and hair splitting thinking of a little mind secure in a position of authority.

Jay deliberately scrounged himself down into his chair so that he was half reclining. He interrupted

with a loud and lazy yawn.

"What's your beef, boys?" he asked, and patted his mouth with a show of indifferent apology.

Five pairs of eyes turned upon him slowly. There was a shocked gasp of incredulity from two Lieutenants J.G., and one Lieutenant S.G. The Captain and Commander, justifying their positions with a better control of emotions, merely thinned their already bloodless lips as they took in the disrespectful position. They pivoted back around and faced Hammond again.

"Specifically," answered the Captain, whose mouth now opened a mere hair line to allow the words to slice through, "you have not complied with Directive AAG-6759302, which, in part, reads as follows: 'Intersol will furnish Space Transport Command, within twenty four hours, a report showing the part number and the chemical and/or metallurgical content of each and every part and fixture in the entire X62 fleet.' That information has not been received, and the twenty-four hours have passed."

Hammond sat straight up in his chair, with an incredulous look on his face.

"That is a stupid request," he answered harshly. "What earthly good could such a thing as that do?"

"I know of nothing," answered the Captain quickly, "in the contract which empowers Intersol to pass upon the value of a directive."

"That is the key!" Jay sat up straight in his chair, and exploded the words into the room. He waved a hand negligently toward the officers. "That's all boys. You can go back to your desks now, and try to think up some more directives."

There was a shocked silence in the room. The Commander turned to the Captain and gave a slight nod. As a well drilled team, the five of them arose to their feet in one fluid motion.

"We bid you good day," the Commander said icily. "Er — ah —" he looked pointedly at Jay, who grinned up at him, "gentlemen!" he finished.

Before Hammond could signal Pete, they had filed through the door and closed it softly behind them.

"You didn't help matters any, Jay." Hammond said with a scowl.

"They couldn't have been any worse," Jay answered.

"But why make it tougher on us?" Hammond asked querulously. "What was the idea of the bad boy act?"

Jay leaned forward in his chair. There was nothing of the lazy indifference in his attitude now.

"Bill, there's no doubt about it. They're out to break us. That's their deliberate intent. I wanted to make them furious, throw them

off stride, to give us time to think."

"But why should they try to break us? What difference does it make to them who carries the supplies to their outposts and bases?"

"On what level was this contract awarded?" Jay asked.

"Direct from Washington," Hammond answered promptly. "The Secretary of Space, himself."

"Was the local command in on it?" Jay asked curiously.

"I don't know," Hammond answered dubiously, trying to see where the tangent was leading them. "I doubt it. It went through pretty fast. Triplanet gave us a lot of trouble, and I knew the local boys were partial to Triplanet. So I went direct to the top. What are you getting at, Jay?"

"Purely a personnel matter," Jay answered. "I suspect the boys have always considered this operation to be a lower echelon matter. When a higher echelon goes over their heads and takes action without consulting them —" He paused and thought a moment.

"Look, Bill," he said suddenly. "You're the President of a big outfit. Your word is law to twenty thousand people. But what would happen if you personally went down into the warehouse and started telling the stock boys how to stack parts in their bins?"

Hammond chuckled.

"I'd have at least fifty supervisors ready to quit," he answered. "They'd say, 'Okay, boss. You want to run the warehouse? Then run it.' You can't have organization when you do those things. I may be President, but I have to go through channels as much as anyone else."

"Exactly," Jay answered. "The local level of STC has its nose out of joint because Washington meddled in its playhouse. They can't very well quit, but with the pure and noble intent of seeing that everything goes just right, they can make Washington sorry it ever did such a thing. Next time, Washington will keep its nose out of their affairs."

"All right," Hammond answered. "I see the point. We're just the football in the middle. They don't give a damn what happens to us, so long as they put over their point. Well, I've burnt my fingers, Jay. Think there's any way you can bandage them?"

Jay sighed. He was being handed a hot potato and both of them knew it. Well, he hadn't made any major blunders of late, perhaps he could survive failure on this one. But could Intersol? Still, no point in adding to Hammond's worries with his own doubts. Give the poor guy what comfort he could.

"I've bandaged a lot of fingers in my time, Bill," he commented lazily. "Some of those fingers are

holding on to important reins now. And, if in this air of gloom there's still room for a pun, I might say, in Washington, 'reigns'."

He stood up and started for the door.

"Most of them conveniently forget," he said. "But every now and then someone remembers. You might ask Pete to handle the paper work for me to leave for Mars tonight. And have him keep it as quiet as possible. If those boys who were here learn about it, I'm sure there'll be a directive to keep me Earthbound."

He turned when he reached the door and added without a smile.

"Purely, you understand, in the interest of saving space for a more vital cargo."

"WHAT is your purpose of coming to Marsport, Mr. Murray? It has not been cut into your orders."

Jay came out of his reverie with a start and found he was standing at the admission desk. He had moved up the line without realizing it. Also, without realizing it, he must have handed the clerk his papers.

"Oh," Jay answered, and then without conscience, "a conference with Admiral Littlefield."

His plan did include a little discussion with Admiral Littlefield, but the Admiral didn't know about it. He hoped he wouldn't be questioned too closely.

The admission officer scratched his head dubiously.

"Funny anything so important wasn't cut into your orders."

"In the first place it's confidential," Jay said in a low voice. "Possibly I should not have told even you. Secondly, you can call him and confirm it."

"Are you kidding," the officer asked drily, and stamped the papers with an okay. He made no effort to check them any further. Any dope in the entire solar system would know he couldn't pull a bluff in the Admiral's name and expect to get away with it.

Outside the receiving depot, Jay headed directly for the maintenance building to find the Intersol Maintenance Super. Old Richie had been a maintenance man for forty years, and the last thirty of them had been on space craft. There might be space engineers with more theory, but Jay would lay money that no one knew more about how to get a craft into space and keep it there than Richie.

Yet, out to the left, there lay those twenty-six space liners, unable to rise.

When Jay walked into the maintenance office which had been set aside for the Super, old Richie looked up from his prints with annoyance. When he saw who had invaded his sanctuary, he stood up and stretched out a welcoming hand.

"Sure good to see you, Jay," he rumbled, and it sounded as if he might really mean it. "What brings you to Mars?"

Jay shook hands with the Super and sank down on a hard plastic chair. His first personnel problem would be to get around Richie, who was a touchy old bas — bird.

"Hear you're having a little maintenance problem, Rich," he answered.

"Little problem!" old Richie exploded. There followed a practiced string of descriptive phrases which left no doubt as to what the Super thought of the matter. As with seamen of old, spacemen had collected and enriched the language with more nouns and adjectives of far places and exotic citizens. Richie knew and used them all.

"Still," he ended with a certain point implication, "it's my problem."

"Boss thought there just might be some personnel aspects to it where I could kind of assist you," Jay said tactfully. He knew in a showdown he could pull rank on the Super, but he had not fallen back on the use of authority for so many years, he felt he wouldn't know how.

"No, Jay," Richie answered thoughtfully. "No problem with any of our men. They're only too anxious to get in and pitch, same as I am."

"Then why don't they?"

"What are they going to work with?" Richie looked at him in disgust. "Can't get replacement parts." Jay saw they had worn the old codger down until he was ready to unload his troubles.

"No parts!" Jay exclaimed. "Great Scott, man, Marsport has the biggest supply depot of the entire solar system. There's enough parts on this planet to run us for the next fifty years."

"Maybe so," Richie agreed. "But no matter what we want, that's just what they happen to be out of. You know, well as I do, Space Transport controls supply. So everything we ask for, they're sorry but they'll have to requisition Earth. You get out here in a day, but it takes a requisition anywhere from ninety days to six months to clear."

"How about patch up and repair?" Jay asked, although he knew Richie had been all over the obvious solutions.

"No," Richie answered shortly. "A new directive. Took me half a day to figure out what it said, but boiling it down, it says that only new parts may be used for replacement and repair. Says every incoming and outgoing ship has to be inspected by an authorized officer of Space Transport. Intersol no longer has authority to pass on what is spaceworthy."

He narrowed his eyes, stared for a moment out the window, and then looked fixedly at Jay.

"You won't believe this, Jay," he said slowly. "But one of those ships out there," he waved his hand in their direction. "You know what's wrong with it? I'll tell you! I'll tell you what's wrong with it!" Jay could see the anger arising in the old man, flushing his face with violent red. "It's got a locker hinge loose. That's all. Ship's grounded because it has a defective mechanism!"

It was so ridiculous, Jay could hardly suppress an explosion of laughter.

"Put on a new hinge then," he said.

"Supply hasn't got one," Richie was fighting to keep control of his temper. "Have to requisition Earth. Take maybe six months to get that ship repaired. Oh they read me quite a lecture, Jay, on how if they let us blood sucking companies get away with little things, we'll risk the big ones. Made me feel like a mass murderer, because I wanted to send a space liner out with a loose hinge on a sailor's clothes locker."

"What about taking one of the ships and cannibalizing it to get repair parts for the others?" Jay asked.

"Has to be a new part," Richie reminded him. "A new part is one which has never been taken from its inspection seal. I proposed that and got another lecture on risking the lives of men by trying to use worn out parts."

"In short," Jay summarized, "their directives, taken individually, are all sound and logical. In an investigation, the Service would be praised for its precautions in protecting lives and property. Taken collectively, they add up to the fact that Intersol can't move a ship."

"Looks like that's about it," Richie agreed. "Oh, by the way, a space gram came for you a while ago." He reached over to one corner of his desk and dug the gram out from under some prints.

Jay opened it and read a confirmation from Sara that she had blasted her way through the Washington secretarial lethargy, and had made contact with an individual who remembered a burnt finger of long ago. He had promised to cooperate — seemed to get a kick out of it, in fact. He would call at a certain time. Jay glanced at the clock, and saw he had about an hour before the call came through. It would take some close timing.

"Look Rich," Jay looked up from the gram and leaned forward, "you know I never mess around in another man's department unless I'm asked."

"Yeah," Richie admitted grudgingly. "I'll give you that. Which is more than I can say for most personnel men."

"All right. Then how about asking me?" Jay grinned.

Old Richie broke through his

prejudice against all white collar people and grinned back.

"Consider it asked. So what? What good can that do?"

"I've got to be at a certain place at a certain time," Jay answered. "But first I want you to take me over to the supply depot. I want to see for myself what kind of a reception you get."

Richie looked at him curiously.

"We'll walk in," Jay went on, "and you ask for a part you see — something you know they've got."

"Ten to one if they've got it they'll say it's reserved and we can't have it," Richie grumbled, but got to his feet. "We'd better go to the side emergency door, though. Get into the administration office part, and we'll cool our heels all day to ask for a cotter key."

Two minutes on the speed track brought them to the side emergency door. They walked in and saw an enlisted man sitting behind a rough table avidly reading a well thumbed copy of FEMS & BEMS. Apparently it contained hot stuff, for the supply clerk didn't bother to look up as they came through the door.

Richie nodded and pointed to a box used as a seat by the clerk. Jay noted it was an X-62 auxiliary generator all crated and ready to install. The Super walked up to the table and slammed down his requisition book and emergency withdrawal permit.

"I want an X-62-674839," he said.

"Haven't got it," the sailor answered promptly. "Have to requisition Earth for it."

Jay stepped forward.

"What's that you're sitting on," he asked

The sailor looked down at the crate between his legs.

"Oh," he said. "Is that what that thing is? Well, I guess if it's an emergency you can have it, and I'll have to find something else to sit on." He leaned over to pull it out for them, and they heard him grumbling under his breath.

"Dam' civilians! Whadda they know about it?"

ADMIRAL LITTLEFIELD was a space sailor of the old school. He did not spare himself, neither did he spare his men. Marsport sat straddle of the Space Transport Command supply route. He, as the Chief Operating Executive of that service, sat straddle of Marsport. If any of his staff preferred the more comfortable life of Earth, let him get out of space and back to water paddling.

He rewarded duty well done by ignoring it as being only what was expected. He punished dereliction or slight with the book. Inasmuch as he had not been consulted by Washington on the granting of this contract to Intersol, he felt he had an extra duty and respon-

sibility to see that said company performed its job, to protect Washington from the consequences of its own follies.

He sent one lone directive down through the echelons of his command. Stripped of the several pages of protocol and verbiage, and translated from the incomprehensibilities so dear to the mind of the military officer, it read:

> 'Since STC has had no previous experience with Intersol Corporation, we require you give them close instruction and direction to the end that every phase of operation is carried out shipshape."

No more was needed, for officers are trained to read attitude between the lines. Woe unto the space officer who let the tiniest thing slip through. Down through the pyramid of echelons, directives piled upon directives.

As Jay was ushered into his presence, the Admiral frowned with white eyebrows together until they met over his thin nose and all but obscured the frosty ice of his eyes. His whole attitude conveyed to Jay that he had agreed to see this civilian only because duty required it. And his attitude further conveyed that he considered it an insult for anyone less than the president of That Company to call upon him.

"And what can I do for you, sir?" he inquired frostily and waved Jay to a foam chair.

"I thought I might ask you personally to assist in the matter of releasing parts for the repair of the X-62's, sir," Jay answered. Apparently there were to be none of the usual social amenities.

"I, to assist?" the Admiral inquired coldly. "I cannot see why it would be felt necessary for you to come to this office for the purely routine function of requisitioning parts, Mr. Murray. I believe they said your name is Murray? Captain Stanwood is in charge of supply. I am sure that if you civilians would learn the value of utilizing the proper channels, your work and results would be more efficient." He looked pointedly out of his window to the fleet of grounded ships where they lay glistening in the pale sun.

"Look, Admiral Littlefield," Jay said easily. "With all due respect to Captain Stanwood, and your proper channels, I want some parts out of that supply depot!"

"And how do you propose to get them, except through the channels?" Jay would not have believed the Admiral's tone could grow more icy than it had been. "I know of no other way," the Admiral finished with finality.

"I do, sir," Jay answered. He had counted on at least a few sentences of greeting, common politeness called for it. His timing was a little off without them. He would have to drag it out.

"The reason I came to you, sir," he said, "is that I want you to bypass Captain Stanwood and all his pretty paper work. I want a good conscientious petty officer who knows the X-62 from nose to exhaust. I want to take that petty officer, our maintenance supervisors, and a fleet of hand trucks and men. I want to go up and down the aisles of the supply depot. I want physically to take the things we need down off the shelves and put them on the hand-trucks. I want parts, not paper work."

The Admiral was growing purple as Jay progressed. Jay, himself, began to feel his throat constricting as the seconds fled by without his expected signal coming through. Heaven help him if the guy in Washington failed!

He had said what he wanted to say. Now he was frantically wondering what else he could say before the Admiral exploded or had a heart attack. The sound of silence in the room was enormous and reverberating. If he said anything more, he would detract from the impression he had made. He had created that explosive mood for a definite reason. He could see the Admiral fighting with himself, torn between the desire to reduce this upstart with his bare hands, or summon an orderly to throw him out bodily. Jay began to wonder which desire would win.

The space visoplate on the desk glowed its welcome pink. The vivid red emergency flash began to pulsate in the pink. Jay allowed a long slow breath to escape between his lips.

His face still purple with rage, the Admiral snapped the button viciously, expecting to blast some poor officer out of space for his interruption. But instead of a frozen faced officer, there was the genial countenance of the Under Secretary of Space, himself, calling from Washington.

"Oh, hello there, Admiral Littlefield," the Under Secretary said cordially.

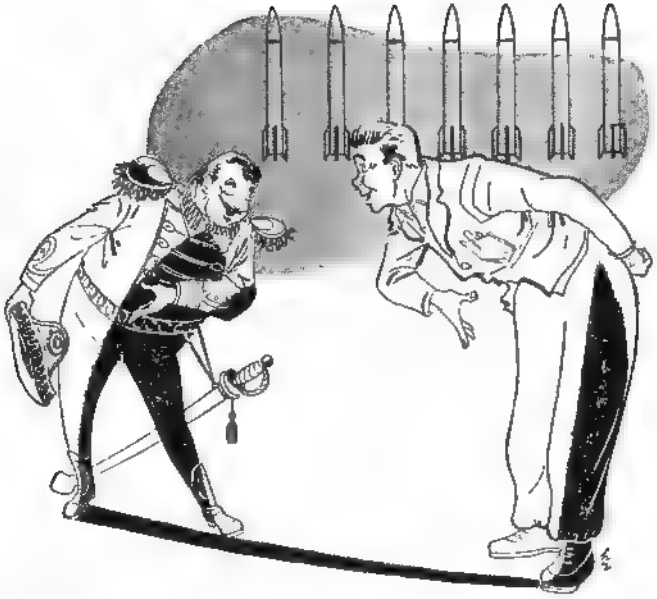
The Admiral composed his face admirably, and answered with his voice under full control.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary."

"I have a favor to ask, Admiral," the Under Secretary said smoothly. "Ordinarily I would go through channels, and not bother you. But this is somewhat urgent, and I felt if you gave your weight to my request —" he ended on a rising note of inquiry.

"Not at all, sir. Certainly, sir," the Admiral spoke hastily. "I am the proper channel for you to use, sir."

"Thank you, Admiral. I'll try not to take advantage of that," the Secretary said with a cordial smile. "But in this case — however, to business I understand the Personnel Director of Intersol is either now on Mars or enroute. It



is urgent I locate him without delay."

His assumption of vague knowledge was amusing to Jay, considering the advance relays and vast organization which must have been set up to get his call through with split second precision in timing.

"My, my," the Admiral was saying. "I wish all my duties were so easily fulfilled, Mr. Secretary. He is sitting here with me now."

"Fine, Admiral, fine," the Secretary congratulated. His tone implied the Admiral had performed a noteworthy task. "Would you put him on?"

"Certainly, sir," the Admiral acceded. "I'll retire to the next room while you speak with him."

"No, no," the Secretary objected hurriedly. "I have a favor to ask him, and it may be you can assist both of us. Please remain." It was a polite order.

Jay stepped into view and stood beside the Admiral. The Under Secretary's face lit up with surprise and joy. Gone now was the formality.

"Jay!" he exclaimed. "Jay Murray! Boy, it's good to see you again. Why the devil don't you ever drop in and see me when you're in Washington?"

The fellow was really doing it up brown, with trimmings. Jay hoped he wouldn't overact the part.

"You know how it is, Carl," he smiled wryly. "You're busy, I'm busy, one thing and another." Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the Admiral's face shifting its planes of expression to wide-eyed amazement.

"Look, Jay," the Secretary went on. "I tried to get you at your office here on Earth, and they told me you were headed for Mars. You're probably on top of the trouble if you're out there, but I thought I'd better confirm. It's too serious a situation to leave to chance. You've done me favors before, and now I'm back for another one."

"I'll be delighted, Carl," Jay answered. "As always."

"This transport breakdown is the problem, Jay. We're in serious trouble if those supply ships don't get through."

"The Admiral and I were just discussing it," Jay said. "It seems the difficulty is lack of repair parts."

"But that can't be, Jay," the Secretary's voice took on a pleading note. "There's a first rate scandal brewing here because too many parts have been sent out there. Now if it should turn out that they're not there after all, Heaven help us. There'll be a reorganization of Space Control from top to bottom."

Jay shrugged his shoulders into the visoplate. His expression showed it was no concern of his what they did to reorganize the service. The Admiral's face showed quite the opposite.

"Admiral Littlefield," the Secretary continued, "I don't have to caution your discretion, but I do want to appeal to you, Jay, not to let this leak out. For some time there has been a strong bloc of World Congress wanting to take Space Transport Command away from the military entirely and place it in civilians hands."

Jay saw the Admiral beside him turn white.

"I genuinely don't believe we're ready for that," the Secretary continued. "But you know politics. Some little thing, such as this temporary maintenance problem, is all the faction would need. Imagine the newspapers if men were threatened with death because somebody on Mars couldn't find repair parts! The World President has asked for a complete report from our department.

"I want you to prepare Intersol's side of that report, Jay. Don't spare anyone. If the Service is at fault, in any remote sense, I want to know about it so we can clear out all the hazards and bottlenecks before that faction learns about them. Can I count on you, Jay?"

"I'll do my best, Carl," Jay answered.

"Just tell me what is keeping you from moving those ships," the Secretary said firmly, almost

grimly. Then he flashed them his famous smile. "Good day, Admiral." He winked fondly at Jay, and said, "Thanks, boy. I know I can count on you."

His face faded from the screen.

Jay sat back down in his chair and faced the Admiral, who was no longer frosty. The Admiral's face was pale, his lips bloodless and lined.

"As I was saying, Admiral," Jay continued affably, "I need a good petty officer to assist in rounding up those parts. Do you think we might possibly find one?"

The Admiral let a sigh escape him, and his shoulders relaxed visibly.

"I'm sure we can, Mr. Murray," he answered.

"Thank you, Admiral," Jay arose and started toward the door.

"Oh — er — Mr. Murray," the Admiral called to his back. Jay turned and faced him. The Admiral rubbed his chin with his fingers, and then looked toward the window and the ships outside.

"Er — ah — in our zeal to make sure the line operated in shipshape fashion, I'm wondering if perhaps we may not —"

"Admiral Littlefield," Jay interrupted him. "In my report to the Secretary of Space, and through him to World President and Congress, I shall have nothing but praise for the diligence of your organization to that effect."

The Admiral whirled around from the window and looked sharply at Jay. He allowed a faint smile to wreath around his lips.

"Still," he said, "I feel that somehow, somewhere, we may also have been at fault. Perhaps we may have been even too diligent."

Jay grinned at him broadly from the door.

"Well, Admiral, in the interests of perfect operation, your officers have been pretty zealous with their directives."

The Admiral grasped his chin again and rubbed it while he looked thoughtful.

"No doubt," he mused, as if he had only now thought of it, "each branch and echelon of the service has felt its directives to be vital. But if we, of a higher echelon, with a broader grasp of the problem, should review them — it is possible we may find an occasional one, here and there, which could be suspended."

Jay let his expression assume the proper gratitude.

"Would you be so kind, Admiral? I hesitated to ask, in view of all your responsibilities. And also, I did not wish to convey the impression that Intersol wished to do a haphazard job."

"Not at all, sir," the Admiral made a slight nod with his head. "I realize the conscientiousness of your Company, and its personnel. I wish to require that you, sir, feel free to call upon me at any time,

for anything which may affect the good of our combined operation. Will you do that, Mr. Murray?"

"An honor, sir," Jay answered and bowed slightly. "One which I do not merit."

"Perhaps you do, Mr. Murray," the Admiral said softly. "Perhaps you do."

"Good day, sir," Jay smiled.

"Good day, Mr. Murray," the Admiral answered, and also bowed slightly. His eyes were still a little frosty, but they were also wary. And deep within them, there was respect — and a faint amusement. Beneath the layers upon layers of training and discipline, the Admiral was still human.

WITHIN three days all the ships were back in space again. Jay saw the last of them off, and headed for Earth.

It was ten o'clock in the morning, and his secretary was taking him to task again for filling his appointment book too full, when the intercom lit up.

"Mr. Hammond calling, Mr. Murray," the operator announced, and there was light hearted music spread all over her voice. The pressure was off, and life was worth living again.

"Look, Jay," Hammond said, as soon as his face had cleared on the screen. For the first time in months, the face showed evidence of rest. "What the hell happened out on Mars?"

"Didn't you get my report?" Jay asked, deadpan.

"Sure. I got your report," Hammond answered. "Here, I'll read it back to you. 'Am pleased to report all ships are spaceworthy and entire operation will shortly be back on schedule.' End of report! Now *Mister* Murray, what kind of a report is that?"

Jay laughed loudly.

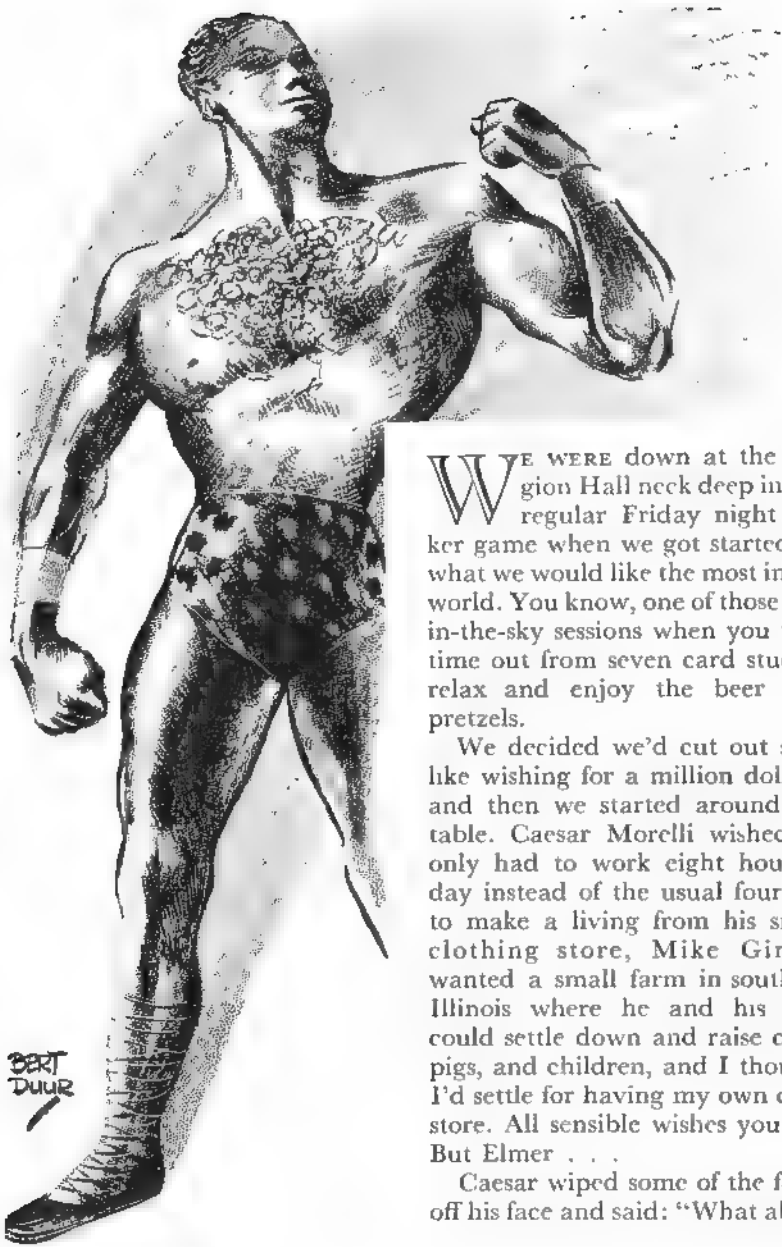
"Bill," he chided. "You caught the report habit from Space Transport. We run a Space Line, not a paperwork factory, remember? 'Results, not reports,' remember when you used to say that?"

"All right, all right," Hammond grumbled. "Not only that. Every department of Intersol is flooded with cancellations of directives. Damn near every hazard they threw under our feet has been cleaned away. What did you do?"

"It turned out to be a personnel matter, after all," Jay answered. "A small psychological matter of knowing how to deal with the official mind."

"Suppose you let me in on the secret," Hammond asked resignedly. "I'll give up trying to get a report, and be happy with results. But just tell me one thing. What the hell is the technique of dealing with the official mind?"

"Oh that," Jay answered, and suppressed a smile. "Why, you bow down to them, Bill. You bow down low enough for them to see a club behind your back!"




WE WERE down at the Legion Hall neck deep in our regular Friday night poker game when we got started on what we would like the most in the world. You know, one of those pie-in-the-sky sessions when you take time out from seven card stud to relax and enjoy the beer and pretzels.

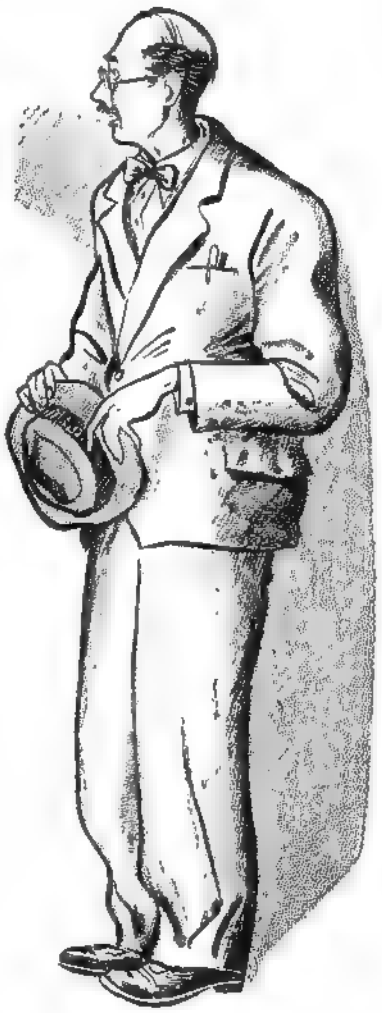
We decided we'd cut out stuff like wishing for a million dollars, and then we started around the table. Caesar Morelli wished he only had to work eight hours a day instead of the usual fourteen to make a living from his small clothing store, Mike Ginsky wanted a small farm in southern Illinois where he and his wife could settle down and raise corn, pigs, and children, and I thought I'd settle for having my own drug store. All sensible wishes you see. But Elmer . . .

Caesar wiped some of the foam off his face and said: "What about

# MUSCLE MAN

**Elmer could have modeled for the 'Before' of those 'Before and After' strong-man ads—so Army decided to do him a favor. A favor?**

## by Frank M. Robinson



you. Elmer? What would you like the most in the world?"

Elmer leaned back in his chair and stared at the overhead light for a long moment and finally said slowly: "I think I'd like to be strong, like Hercules or Atlas or one of those wrestlers on television."

Offhand you might think he was kidding but one look at Elmer and you'd know better. He was tall as a basketball center and thin as a slice of restaurant ham, with sloping shoulders and a slouch to go with it. You can fill in the rest of the picture yourself, from the thin, sharp face with the angular nose to the wispy blonde hair on top of his head.

We sat there feeling a little awkward — Elmer's wish was a lot like a blind man wishing he could see or a cripple wishing he could walk — and decided we'd try and kid him out of it.

"What do you want to be

strong for?" Caesar asked. "As long as you can walk up and down a flight of stairs and you're fairly healthy, what's the sense of being all muscles? I've seen people in lots worse shape than you are anyways."

"With all the machines we have nowadays," Mike said gravely, "you don't need muscles. Big muscles, like your appendix, are just hangovers from the cave-man days."

"Besides," I added, "what people don't have in muscles and looks they usually make up in something else."

And then I felt uncomfortable for fear that Elmer would ask me what. Elmer Hulsman, besides not being a mass of muscle, hadn't been gifted by nature in any other respect either. Some people, if they don't have brawn, usually make it up in brains or maybe personality. But Elmer was no genius and when it came to personality, he was the type who could crash a party and nobody would throw him out because nobody would even notice he was there.

Elmer was just Elmer, a shoe clerk at a local department store, and that's probably all he'd ever be, one of the anonymous millions who serve the thankless public.

"It's just a wish," Elmer said defensively. "I'd like to be strong and well-built, that's all."

It wasn't hard to understand. Elmer probably had a long record of being kidded about his skinny frame and it was ten to one he avoided the public bathing beaches like the plague.

"Maybe you don't eat enough or you have the wrong kind of diet, something like that," Caesar said, trying to be helpful.

"You should exercise," I suggested. "Play handball or lift weights, swim a lot. That will build you up quick."

"I know," Elmer sighed, "but somehow I just don't seem to have the energy, the pep. When I come home from work, I don't feel like doing anything."

We let the conversation hang there and started playing poker again, with Caesar dealing a hand of spit-in-the-ocean. I lost the next couple of pots because I was too busy thinking about Elmer. I thought I had an idea that could help him and I was playing with it like a cat with a ball of yarn. Vitamins and concentrates would help Elmer some, of course, but they took a long time to work. What Elmer needed was something more than that, something that would act immediately, something that would give him enough pep and enthusiasm to chase down to the neighborhood YMCA three or four nights a week.

After the game broke up, I got Caesar and Mike aside and explained it to them. I thought it was practically fool proof.

"And you think it will really work?" Caesar asked skeptically.

"Why not? Doctors give sugar pills to people a lot of times and people think they're honestly helped by them. Same general idea in faith healings. Make them think they're being helped and they actually will be."

"There won't be any danger to it, will there?" Mike asked.

"Don't be silly," I said. "I'm a registered pharmacist."

Well, the idea was simplicity itself. I got a little mold from the drug store and took it home and started to make pills. A little flour, some sugar, ground up aspirin, a dash of tabasco sauce, a whiff of wintergreen, and just about anything else that happened to be on the kitchen shelf. And, of course, a little of the vitamins so I wouldn't be peddling a complete pig in a poke.

It wasn't hard to sell Elmer on the idea of taking two a day and convincing him that on the second or third day he should begin to feel a lot more energetic. I charged him just enough so he'd believe there was something to them — I would have given them to him but most people have the idea that if something is free, it can't be much good.

It was a month or so before I thought of Elmer again. We were playing poker — with somebody else sitting in for Elmer — when I asked Caesar how he was.

"He's looking good," Caesar said. "Went in to get a pair of shoes yesterday and saw him then. Looks like he's gained a little weight."

"How come he hasn't been around lately?" I asked.

Caesar laid down a hand of aces-on-kings and raked in the pot. "I asked him down and he said he couldn't spare the time, that he spends all his nights at some gym downtown."

"The pills really worked then."

"Oh, I don't know," Caesar said. "He always wanted to be strong and now he's finally got up enough ambition to do something about it."

"Just the same," I said, "I think they might have helped."

Another month or two went by before I ran into Elmer myself. He was looking good, really good. He was still on the slender side but he must have gained about fifteen pounds of weight since I had seen him last. In a few more months, I thought, we wouldn't recognize him.

"How's it going, Elmer?"

"Swell," he said. "I feel better than I ever have and I've put on a lot of weight, too."

"The pills really fixed you up, hmmm?"

His face sobered. "They sure did. I can't figure out why they're not sold on the general market, Army. The company that manu-

factures those could make a fortune."

"You usually get them only on doctor's orders," I explained. "They're pretty potent pills."

I slapped him on the back and told him to keep it up, then left, feeling rather proud of myself. It isn't often that a little homemade psychology like that pays off but when it does, it really makes you feel good.

We never did see Elmer at any more of our poker games. He was always down at the gym, working out and swimming and wrestling and exercising. I kept in touch with him through Caesar and Mike and some of the boys.

The first inkling I had that there might be a catch to it all was when I happened to stop in at Caesar's Clothing Center. After Caesar had finished wrapping up a necktie for me, I asked him about Elmer.

"He's coming along great," Caesar said, leaning his elbows on the counter. "I see quite a lot of him lately because he buys all his clothes here."

"Is he turning into a fashion plate too?" I asked.

"Well, you see," Caesar continued, "he's growing out of all his clothes and he comes in here to get new ones. He's wearing larger shirts, he's had to buy a new suit and top-coat, and even his underwear doesn't fit him any more." Caesar turned back to his shelves. "You see, it has its drawbacks — it's costing him a lot of dough for new clothes. Besides, I kind of wonder when he's going to lay off the stuff. How strong does he want to be, anyways?"

"Nature takes care of that," I said. "After all, you can only get so strong."

After I left Caesar I thought I'd drop over and have a talk with Elmer. I was curious to see what he looked like now.

He met me at the door in a blue bathrobe that seemed about two sizes too small for him. The gauntness had left his face and his shoulder bulged beneath the robe.

"Hi, Arny," he said, "come on in."

I walked in and looked his room over with interest. One half of it was devoted to his bed and a wardrobe closet. The rest of it was taken up with pulley weights, a punching bag, a barbell set, and other athletic gear. The room smelled vaguely of sweat and liniment.

He peeled off his robe and started skipping rope.

"I thought you did all your exercise at the gym," I said.

"Most of it. I only keep these here for use in my spare time. Hey, Arny, take a look." He dropped the skip rope and struck a pose in front of a new, full length mirror.

"Some biceps, eh? Eighteen

inches, Arny. And get a look at these pectorals."

"I wouldn't know one from the other," I said, slightly awed. The skinny, pathetic Elmer I had known had given way to a husky athlete with muscles that would put a Tarzan to shame. "You still taking the pills?" I asked.

"Sure, Arny, they're the nuts. Say, how do you like this trapezius?" And he struck another pose.

"Great," I said. "I was down to see Caesar today and he tells me you're growing out of all your clothes."

"Can't get a fit any more, just busting out all over. Say, Arny, what would you think if I took a little more weight off my gluteus maximus and added a little more on the deltoids? I'd have better definition that way, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," I said bewildered. "I was thinking — isn't it expensive having to buy new clothes all the time?"

He went back to skipping rope. "Not too much. They pay me down at the gym to teach on the side. I don't tell anybody about your pills, though." He grinned. "That's my own secret."

"Doesn't anybody complain about your skipping rope and having all the apparatus in here?"

He laughed genially and flexed another set of muscles. "They used to — but they don't anymore."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "When are you going to stop, Elmer? When do you think you'll be strong enough?"

"Why should I stop? he asked puzzled. "Honest, Arny, all my life I wanted to be strong. You probably wouldn't understand, unless you had been kidded about being weak ever since you were a kid. Arny, I think I want to be the strongest man in the world."

He was really going places, I thought, but he could go too far. You can die from lack of water but you can also die from too much of it.

I KEPT up with Elmer after that but not what you would call directly. He quit his shoe job and was doing pretty good working for the gym and posing for "after" pictures in some of the muscle ads. And then one night we were down at the Legion Hall watching wrestling on TV and who should come on but Elmer.

"He's sure changed, hasn't he?" Mike said, impressed.

He was even bigger than when I had last seen him, and it was all muscle. His opponent never had a chance.

"There's something that's worrying me," Caesar said, watching the screen. "You know, even given the ambition, you would think there was still a limited amount that Elmer could have accomplished."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I think the pills really worked and I think they must have given him something more than just pep. Maybe they did something to his glands, something like that."

"Nonsense," I said. "Everything that went into those pills was harmless."

"By themselves," Caesar corrected, "but how about in combination?"

He had a point, though chances were against the combination ever being harmful or acting as a trigger for some of Elmer's glands.

"How many pills did you give him?" Caesar asked.

"Enough to last for a year," I said, feeling cold. And there was slight chance that I could ever get them away from him either.

MY VACATION came up along about then and I was out of touch with Elmer for a while, except for maybe an occasional squib in the paper. How Elmer parked his car downtown in a small parking space by lifting one end of the car in first, then the other; how Ringling Brothers wanted to hire him for the strong man in their side show, and how his brothers in the wrestling fraternity no longer cared to meet him in the ring.

When I came back, the first thing I did was check in with Caesar to find out how Elmer was.

"I don't know," Caesar said. "He doesn't stop in here any more to buy his clothes."

"How come?"

"He has to get them special made," Caesar said slowly. "He's — too big for ordinary sizes now."

"What's he look like?"

"You'd have to see him to believe it," Caesar said grimly. "He's Gargantua wearing pants."

"What do you think we ought to do?" I asked, feeling somewhat shaken.

He shrugged. "Why do anything? Maybe he likes it the way he is."

"He's getting to be a freak," I said. "I think we ought to stop him for his own good."

"Maybe you could make up some more pills, have them analyzed, then make up something just the opposite," he suggested.

"I can't — I never kept a list of the stuff and how much I put in. I never thought it was important at the time!"

Well, I worried about it for a week and finally I thought I'd better see Elmer and try and get him to stop.

He was a big man now, a giant. He bulged, he bulked, he was huge. If he took a deep breath you knew he would split his coat, and if he made a muscle in his arm he'd tear the seams in the sleeves. Every muscle in his body stood out in bas relief and his head looked oddly small perched

on the top of a mountain of iron-hard flesh.

He was working out with the barbells when I came in and he stopped only long enough to go through the mirror routine.

I told him what I came to see him about. "You don't want to end up a sideshow freak, Elmer," I pleaded. "Maybe, if you wanted me to, I could make up some pills to do just the reverse of what the last ones did."

"Why should I stop?" Elmer asked frankly. "People respect me, a lot of them are even afraid of me. It's something I've never experienced before, Arny, and I like it."

"Where's it going to end?" I said. "What's the limit?"

"Who said there was a limit? How high is up?"

The psychologists could probably trace it back to his childhood, I thought, when all the other kids in the block used to call him skinny. Combine a burning desire and a fluke of kitchen chemistry and this was what you got.

I got my hat and went to the door and held out my hand. He shook his head. "I'm afraid I might crush your fingers by mistake," he said, and grinned inanely. When I left, he was back in front of the mirror striking another pose.

Halfway down the hall, I made up my mind to go back and try again. It was worth the good old college try, even if he finally threw me out.

I was just outside the door when a series of popping sounds came from within his room and then an odd silence. The door wasn't locked and when he didn't reply to my knock, I just opened it and walked in.

Well, I found out what the limit was. It hadn't been what I expected. Elmer's muscles had grown to enormous strength, but exercise doesn't increase the strength of your bones. And when you tense your muscles you put a lot of force on the bones, like pulling the string in a bow.

I felt sick. Elmer had been posing in front of his mirror when I left, tensing all his muscles at the same time.

And Elmer, tall as he was, was what you would call delicately boned.

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*"Well sir." He cleared his throat again and said, "We found her in the number eight compartment."*

LIEUTENANT Johnny Norsen, his lanky body sprawled uncomfortably in an acceleration chair, was playing Spartan rules with the darts, and paused only momentarily before each shot. Spartan rules were pretty Spartan, but in spite of the handicaps he hit the bull's eye six times out of six and grunted in disgust.

He complained, to no one in particular, "This was a swell game when we first brought it aboard. Now everybody is as good as it's possible to get. We might as well flush it overboard."

No one in particular happened

The *New Taos* was headed into space for a year when the stowaway was discovered. As Lt. Norsen said, "Forty-five men and one woman — oh, *no!*"

to be Dick Roland, ship's navigator. He looked up from the onion skin, paper bound history he was reading. "Ummm," he said vaguely. "Maybe we could toughen up the rules."

"How?" Norsen grumbled. "They're as tough already as it's possible to get them. We'd have to close both eyes, or something." He shifted in his chair, yawned and recrossed his legs. "What in the *kert* are you reading?"

"*Decline and Fall of the United States*. Ancient history. What do you think of it?" The navigator was young, rather handsome in an easy-going sort of way, but almost colorless in his lack of aggressiveness.

Johnny Norsen yawned again. "I don't like history, so I've only read the book four or five times." He looked up at the earth time chrono on the wall. "Let's crack today's video-news."

Dick Roland followed his eyes. "We've still got five minutes to go," he protested mildly.

The other was irritated. "Five minutes, ten minutes, what's the difference? Today is today. It's not as though we were cracking next week's news. Besides, I think Doc Thorndon's crazier than a *makron*. What difference does it make when we show a news wire?"

He knew the answer to his own question as well as anyone else in the *New Taos*, but it was something to talk about.

Dick Roland said, "I think it's a good idea. Keeps us interested in things. Every day we can look forward to getting the news. Sure, it's a full year old, but that doesn't make any difference to us. *We* haven't heard it yet. Doc Thorndon says it's one way of keeping space cafard from hitting the crew —something new every day, something to look forward to."

Norsen screwed up his angular face. "Where'd Doc get the idea, anyway? We never did it before."

Dick closed his history and tossed it to the wardroom table. He'd read it half a dozen times already, himself. He said, "You know Doc. Always reading those old books. From what he says, back in ancient times they used to pull the same idea — weather station men who were stuck up in the Artic and snowed in for maybe six months at a crack. They'd have a file of newspapers on hand, and each day they'd take one off the top. The news was exactly one year old, but it didn't make any difference to them. They hadn't read it before and so it was as fresh as though it'd just happened. When their supplies came in, in the Spring, they'd get another batch of papers."

Lieutenant Norsen looked up at the chrono again. "Well, it's time now. Let's crack today's. I want to see if there's anything on Jackie Black. It's about time

for him to pull one of his jobs again. That little makron is sure giving the S.S.B.I. a run for their credits."

Dick Roland was on his feet and getting the video-news wire from its built-in file. "Ummm," he said. "Most effective criminal for the past century. If he keeps on making haul after haul, he ought to be set for life pretty soon."

Ensign Mart Bakr, his chubby face questioning, and his mouth still working on some tidbit or other, hurried through the ward-room door. "Haven't started the video-wire yet have —" He saw they were about to run it and interrupted himself. "Good," he said, and slumped into a chair.

"Be ready in a second," Dick Roland told him.

"Good. By the way, you fellows hear the news?"

They weren't particularly interested. There *wasn't* any news that could develop on a space cruiser on a year long trip.

He said, nonchalantly, "Commander Gurloff thinks he'll turn around and head back home."

They spun on him. "*What!*"

He grinned at their excitement. "April Fool!"

They stared at him, then their eyes went to each other, questioningly.

Doctr Thorndon entered the tiny officer's mess and wardroom just in time to pick up the end of the conversation. He said soothingly, "Never mind, boys, he's not down with cafard. It's a joke."

"A joke?" Johnny Norsen grumbled. "Why the fat little *makron* had Dick and me believing him for a minute. What's this about April something or other?"

Doc Thorndon settled into a chair. He was a cheerful, roly-poly man, his cheeks still pink but his hair thinning and graying. He was about forty-five — old for the space service.

"April Fool," he said. "It's a time-honored jest. By the ancient calendar there was a day in the Terran year during which persons played practical jokes on each other. When the victim became indignant, the perpetrator merely called out *April Fool!* and the other was forced to admit himself duped."

They still didn't quite get it. Doc Thorndon added, patiently, "If we were still following the old calendar, this would be April 1st, All Fool's Day, as they called it."

Dick Roland said, "Well, anyway, here's the video-news for *last* April Fool's Day." He dimmed the room's lights and flashed the video wire on the wall so that everyone could read.

Over an hour later, he said, "Should we run it again now, or should we wait another couple of hours."

"Three times is enough," Johnny Norsen said, "We'll get tired of it, otherwise. Remember,

it's another twenty-four hours until we get another one. Let's sit around and discuss it for awhile."

"Yeah," Mart Bakr said. The chubby third officer shook his head in reluctant admiration. "Did you see that item about Jackie Black? They almost got him there on Calypso, but he's too slick for them."

Johnny Norsen grunted contemptuously. "I don't think that was him at all. Too big, for one thing. I wouldn't be surprised if Black was still on Earth. They've been reporting him on every planet and satellite in the system, but I'll bet he never left Neuve Los Angeles, where he pulled his last —"

"Caper," Doc Thorndon said.

The other three looked at him. "His what?" Mart Bakr asked.

"His caper," the doctr repeated, pleased with himself. "It's a new word I ran into today. Criminals used to call a crime a *caper*."

Dick Roland shook his head and grinned. "What a hobby. Prehistoric slang."

There was a gentle knock at the wardroom door and the four of them looked up at the messman who stood there, somewhat nervous at being in officer's country.

"Yes, Spillane?" Johnny Norsen said.

The messman cleared his throat. "Could you tell me where the skipper is, sir?"

"I think he's sleeping, Spillane. What is it?"

"Well, sir. Well . . . there's a stowaway on board." He cleared his throat again and said, "We found her in the number eight compartment." His eyes went from one to the other of them. He added, decisively, "Yes, sir."

Doc Thorndon was the first to explode. "Her!" he blurted.

Mart Bakr started suddenly to laugh. His chuckle swelled into a roar and the others turned to stare at him in his turn. He was finally able to get out, "April Fool! We all hit again. *April Fool!*"

Spillane looked blank.

The faces of the others relaxed. Even the angular features of Johnny Norsen twisted themselves in a wry grin. He said, "You certainly caught us, Spillane."

The messman looked anxiously from one of the ship's officers to the other. "Yes, sir," he said. "What?"

Johnny Norsen scowled and said, "Run along now, Spillane. It was a good joke. Congratulations."

"Joke, sir? What joke?"

Doc Thorndon had settled back into his chair now. "Oh, come along, Spillane. We —"

A new voice, pitched low, and somewhat timid, said from the doorway, "Could I come in, now?"

Johnny Norsen was facing the other way. He didn't turn to look

at her for a full minute. Instead, he closed his eyes and muttered in pain, "Oh, *no*. Forty-five men and one woman in a ship that's to be in space for twelve months!"

She wasn't beautiful, nor even pretty, as current tastes went — but she had something, very definitely. She was about five foot five and probably in her middle twenties. Her attractiveness lay in a certain *eagerness*, a brightness, an interest in what was going on about her, no matter what it might be. Yes, she had something, very definitely. It was hard to put your finger on it.

Right now, she was attired in a simple sports dress, wrinkled and somewhat soiled from her period in hiding among the supplies in compartment eight. Her eyes went nervously from one to the other of them and she self consciously brushed her clothes, avoiding her breasts and hips, as though not wishing to bring her sex to their attention.

Johnny Norsen blurted, "Holy Jumping *Wodo*, Miss! Do you know where you are?"

She looked down at the steel deck, toeing in like a little girl who'd been caught at something naughty. Her voice was very low. "Yes, sir," she whispered.

"Oh, you do, eh?" Norsen rasped.

Mart Bakr spoke for the first time since the apparition had appeared. "Don't pick on her, Norsen," he said truculently. "Can't you see the poor kid's scared?"

The first officer spun on him. "Scared?" he said bitterly. "We're the ones that ought to be scared." He turned back to the girl. "Come on, Miss. Let's go see the captain."

Mart Bakr and Dick Roland, the latter's eyes still popping, started to follow into the corridor. Johnny Norsen grunted, "You two had better stay here. This many of us can't crowd into the skipper's quarters." He added, sarcastically, "Besides, it's probably going to be a trifle hot in there."

He made no protest when Doctr Thorndon followed and the three of them, ship's first officer, stowaway, and ship's doctr made a procession down the corridor past a score of open mouthed crew members.

"Oh, brother, a dame on board," a jetman muttered happily.

"Knock it off, Johnson," the first officer snapped in irritation over his shoulder.

They rapped at the Captain's cubbyhole which doubled as his living quarters and the space cruiser's office. A voice from within growled, "What the *kert* is it?"

Norsen fingered the door release and entered, followed by the two others.

There was a flat silence which Johnny Norsen broke by saying dryly, "A stowaway, sir. The crew found her in the number eight compartment."

Commander Mike Gurloff had been relaxed on his bunk, staring unseeingly at the overhead. Now he spun around and came to an elbow, blinking.

"Holy Jumping *Wodo!*" he blurted.

"Yes, sir," Norsen said. "That's what I said. Probably the first female stowaway on a military craft since the beginning of intergalactical warfare." He added, as though anyone needed reminding, "A year long cruise — forty-five men and one woman."

Doc Thorndon closed the door behind them. He said, softly, "We're only three days out, Mike." He was the only man aboard who habitually called the burly commander by his first name. "We could turn back."

The skipper brought his feet around to the floor and sat up. He stared at the girl, almost vacantly, then lowered his shaven head into his hands. He was a big man and toughened by the long years in the space service which had seen him rise to the position of the outstanding ship's officer of his generation. He sat there like that for a full five minutes.

Finally he took a deep breath and brought his eyes up to her. "What is your name, Miss?" Then he cleared his throat and said, more gently, "Don't be afraid. What's your name?"

"It's Kathleen . . . sir." She added, after swallowing, "They call me Kathy."

He continued to look at her, and she said, nervously, "Kathleen Westley."

"All right, Miss Westley. Now tell us about it." He indicated the swivel chair at the desk, the only chair in the tiny room. "You might as well sit down."

She sat in the chair, knees together and her hands in her lap, and looked less frightened now.

Gurloff said, "Tell us about it."

She swallowed once more and said, "I don't see why women aren't allowed in the Space Service." There was an edge of defiance in her voice.

Doc Thorndon said softly, "There are various reasons, Miss. Some of them medical, especially in inter-galactical travel."

"Well, I don't see —"

Commander Gurloff said, "It doesn't make much difference right at the moment, does it? What are you doing aboard my ship, Miss Westley?" His face was expressionless, almost as though he was too tired to care.

She tossed her head infinitesimally, and her lower lip protruded. "I . . . I've always wanted to be a space . . . well, a *spaceman*."

Inadvertently, Gurloff's eyes took in her full breast, her rounded hips. He said, wryly, "I'm afraid something went wrong with your ambitions twenty-five or so years ago."

The girl flushed, but her face remained defiant.

Doctr Thorndon said, "To make it short, Miss Westley, do we understand that you stowed away on this vessel to prove that women are quite as suitable for space travel as are men?"

Her mouth tightened stubbornly and she nodded.

Commander Gurloff asked, "And did you know that this vessel was to be in space for a period of over a year, Miss? A year is rather a long time."

Her eyes widened at that. "A . . . a year?"

Gurloff grunted, suddenly weary of the interview. He said, "Mr. Norsen, take our . . . our passenger back to the officer's mess. I suppose she's hungry." He thought it over briefly. "She can have the second and third officer's stateroom. One of them can bunk with you, the other in the ship's hospital." His mouth tightened. "See that the lock on the door is in good repair and that she has a key."

The skipper's eyes went back to the girl. He said, "Later — we're going to have lots of time, Miss Westley — later, you can give us any further details about your decision to become a . . . a spaceman." He motioned with his head and Johnny Norsen took her by the arm to lead her out.

Gurloff said, "Do you mind staying a while, Doctr?"

After the first officer and the girl had left, Doc Thorndon sank into the chair she had vacated. He waited for the other to speak.

Commander Mike Gurloff sank prone on the bed again and his eyes focused on a rivet in the overhead. He said, "Possibly she's the straw."

"The one that broke the camel's back, eh?"

Gurloff said, "Doc, have you wondered why we've been sent out on a cruise less than two weeks after the last one? Out on a cruise that'll take over a year? *A year!* And half of my men on the verge of space cafard after finishing the last trip."

Doctr Thorndon nodded and rubbed the end of his nose with a forefinger. He said, "No, I haven't wondered. I know the reason, Mike. By the way, did *you* know that they sent us off in such a hurry that our supplies of books, games, music wires, video-wires — all of our means of entertainment, in short — were 'accidentally' not replenished? Nothing, that is, except last year's news wires."

Mike Gurloff's eyes came around to him and his lips thinned back over his teeth.

Doc Thorndon nodded again. "The men are reading books that they've already read a dozen times over; playing games they're sick and tired of; seeing video-shows they've already memorized. They'll never get through the full year, Mike. Cafard will have us in less than six months."

The skipper's face went blank again and he stared vacantly at the overhead.

Doc Thorndon said, "They've got you this time, I'm afraid, Mike."

Gurloff bit out stubbornly. "The crew is with me. We're the proudest ship in the fleet. We've got a record that's the envy of the solar system. We'll —"

The doctr shook his head. "I'm afraid you're going to have to turn back, Mike. I can't guarantee this crew's mental health for a period of a year."

Gurloff held a hand up, clenched the fist. "We've *got* to make it!"

He came to his elbow again, faced the other. "I've got them this time, Doc, if we can just make this trip. Don't you see? The filthy *makrons* can't stand outspoken criticism. They hate the popularity I've been accumulating with the public. I've become the spokesman for the opposition, and they've tried to keep me quiet by a series of cruises that seemed impossible to succeed. They've sent the *New Taos* to spots that required a full fleet, and we came back with the information they wanted. They sent us on assignments impossible to achieve, and we achieved them. And each time we won out, we gained that much more of the public's approval."

Doc Thorndon allowed a half smile to touch his mouth. "Sure, Mike. And each time we returned from a cruise, you made a withering speech against the powers that be, against the present administration. And, each time, they've pulled the same trick; they've sent you out on another long cruise to get you away from Solar System politics. Each time they figured to be rid of you — and this time, Mike, I'm afraid they've won."

"No!"

"Yes."

The skipper glared at him.

Doc Thorndon held his palms up in a hopeless gesture. "If you try to complete the trip, your whole crew will be down with cafard in months. If you return, before completing your assignment they'll have a legitimate excuse for court martialing you." His voice went gentler now. "Personally, Mike, I'd stick it out with you. I'm behind what you stand for. I think every man on the ship is also. But —"

Gurloff said, in sudden enthusiasm, "I'll give them a talk over the inter-communication sys-

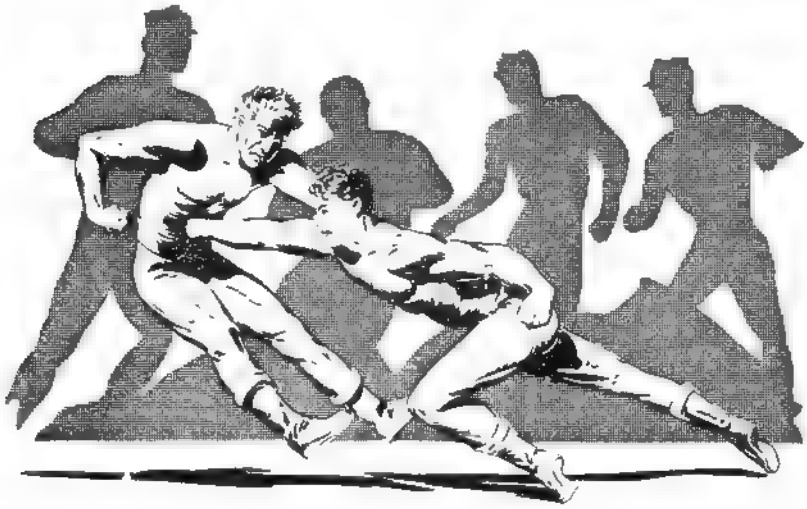
tem. I'll explain the whole thing Let them know why we've been discriminated against like this. Why we've been sent out repeatedly, without sufficient rest periods between."

Thorndon rubbed the end of his nose again and scowled. "You'll do nothing of the sort, Mike. At first, they'd all be with you. But, as the months went by and as the grief piled up, they'd begin, subconsciously, at first, to see that it was you alone who was bringing such strain upon them. There'd be too much of that strain, finally, Mike. They'd turn on you."

Gurloff slumped back into his bunk and thought about it. "They'll know sooner or later anyway," he growled. "You said that we've got a full year's supply of news wires on board. It won't be long before somebody runs off that one telling about my last speech, just before we left. Then they'll know why the *New Taos* was sent out again so soon. That is, if they don't know already. Maybe somebody heard the talk, or read about it, while they were ashore."

Doc Thorndon grinned. "I doubt if anybody heard it except me. They were all too busy wine, women, and song-ing, to listen to speeches. And I took care of the wires. I've made arrangements so that the Video-news

*Ward spun him around and grasped his coverall front. "Watch your damned mouth!" he bit out between his teeth.*



wires are run off one a day. The cruise will almost be over before they come to that speech of yours." His face soured again. "But the point is, Mike, that we're not going to last that long. Even if this girl . . ."

He broke off and stared at the other. Finally he said, slowly, "You know, Mike, maybe we're wrong. Maybe she's not the straw that broke the camel's back. Maybe she's a second backbone for the poor beast."

Gurloff scowled over at him. "I don't get you, Doc."

"You will, Mike. You will. Maybe we'll be able to take this next twelve months, after all." The Doctr licked his upper lip, thoughtfully. "I think I'll just go and see Miss . . . see Kathy, now. I've got some things I want to talk over with her."

THE conversation between Doc Thorndon and Kathy had been a lengthy one, and the officers and crew of the space cruiser *New Taos* would have been surprised at the ship's doctr they thought they knew so well for his gentle kindliness. In fact, it could hardly be described as a conversation at all, since it started as an argument and wound up as a series of commands none too softly spoken.

Doc Thorndon shook his finger at her, not disguising his irritation.

"You just think you can't sing. Let me tell you, you *can* sing. Can and will! Just remember, you've the only feminine voice on board. To a man, a woman's voice sounds better than any masculine one — particularly after a few weeks in space, not to speak of months. *Any* woman's voice."

Kathy had her eyes on the floor and her lower lip was out in what was almost a pout. "I don't see why —"

Thorndon grunted, "You don't have to see why. I'll do the seeing why, and the thinking, Kathy. I've let it go out over the ship that we are to have a . . . a *show* in about a month. The men are already spending almost full time in preparation. They're making costumes, arranging scenery, composing songs. It's keeping them busy. Busy, understand?" He paused momentarily, realizing that she didn't know just how important that was.

He finished with, "We've made an agreement, Kathy. Now let's stick to it."

She said, stubbornly, "I still say I can't sing, and, what's more, I've never done any acting."

"You've got a month to learn," Doc said sharply.

Kathy twisted in her chair, shrugged her shoulders. "Seems to me," she pouted, "the doctr on this ship is more important than the captain."

His mouth remained expres-

sionless and she didn't know him well enough to see the amusement in his eyes. He said, "Believe me, Kathy, on a ship faced with space cafard, he *is*."

KATHY sat at the small table in the officer's wardroom and eyed the three of them severely. She said, "Johnny, Dick, Martie — I won't have any more of this bickering. Either you'll be nice, or I'm not going to . . . to put up with it. I'll go in and talk with Commander Gurloff for the next two hours, and then the officer's share of the day will be through."

Mart Bakr flashed an irritated glance at the lanky Johnny Norsen. "It's his fault," he grumbled. "He wants you to himself all the time. I thought it'd be a good idea if we went into the galley and whipped up some taffy or —"

Johnny Norsen was on his feet. "Why you chunky little chowhound, I'll —"

Mart Bakr jumped up to face him, his face livid, "Don't you call me names, you long legged *makron!*"

"*Please!*" Kathy breathed, putting her hands over her ears.

The usually easy going Dick Roland reddened angrily, "Watch your language, Bakr," he snapped.

JAK HEMING, Space Rifleman, 2nd Class, hurried down the corridor and into the crew's mess, bearing his invaluable burden importantly. He looked about the compartment in surprise.

"Where the kert is everybody?" he said. Only three others were present.

Taylor was nearest the door. He stuck his head out, looked up and down the passageway outside. "Any braid around?" he asked.

Heming shook his head. "The officers are all up forward. Just gave me the video-news wire for today. Holy *Wodo*, I expected everybody off watch to be waiting here for it."

Taylor said, "We got *two* shows today, Jak. And everybody but us four is watching the second one."

Heming didn't get it. Scowling questioningly at them, he went to the projector and began to insert the wire.

Woodford, 1st Signalman, explained. "Rosen and Johnson are having it out with stun guns down in the tract-torpedo room."

The space rifleman stared. "A fight! You mean that they're having a fight?"

Taylor said, "That's right." He seemed pleased about it. "A fight it is. The screwy *makrons* got into an argument about Kathy and they decided to have it out. The Doc is refereeing the thing. He made 'em turn the stun guns down so they can't hurt each other too much."

"Doc Thorndon?" That was as surprising as the fact that a fight

was taking place at all. "That doesn't sound like the Doc; he's the one that usually cools everything off."

"Let's see the wire," Woodford complained. "Now that I think about it, I'm sorry I didn't go down and see the fight. It's just that I can't wait to see whether or not they got this Jackie Black yet." He shook his head in reluctant admiration. "Now, there's a guy for you. Slick as they come, and tough as they come, too."

Taylor added, "They'll get him. Just wait and see. The Solar System Bureau of Investigation gets them all, sooner or later. They'll —"

Heming snapped, "Like kert they will! You just never hear about the guys they *don't* catch, they don't give them no publicity. Ten credits says they haven't caught Black by the time we end this here trip."

Taylor said sourly, "You know gambling isn't allowed in space."

"Put up, or shut up. I say they won't catch Jackie Black by the time we get back."

Taylor flushed angrily. "All right, all right. I'll just take that."

"Let's see the wire and knock off all this argument," somebody else put in.

The news video began to flash and they lapsed into silence.

IN THE brief darkness of the shadow of a space rifle, Mart Bakr whispered hurriedly, urgently, "I could come to your room later, while Dick is on watch and while Johnny Norsen is sleeping. We —"

"Why, Martie," she said scoldingly, but keeping her voice low. "I . . . I think you're insulting me."

He protested, vehemently as possible in his whisper.

ON WATCH in the control room Petersen said to Ward, "You know, when she first came aboard, that is, when we first caught her, Kathy didn't look so good to me. Nice girl, you know, but not what I'd call pretty. But these last six months with her being the only gal on board —"

Ward said coldly, "Just what do you mean, Petersen?"

The other shrugged. "You know, like that old, old gag they used to tell about the soldiers in New Guinea in the second — or was it the third or fourth? — World War. The one soldier'd say to the other one, 'You know, the longer I'm here the less black they look to me.' "

Ward spun him around and grasped his coverall front. He bit out between his teeth, "Listen, you *makron*, you're talking about *Kathy*, understand! Watch your damned mouth!"

KATHY, Doc Thorndon, Mart Bakr, Johnny Norsen and

Dick Roland sat in the officer's wardroom, preparatory to showing that day's news wire. In spite of the importance of this one break in the day's monotony, the eyes of all three of the younger men were on the girl.

Used, by this time, to the attention, Kathy was able to ignore it. She said, "Just who is this Jackie Black that you're always talking about?"

"The last of the Robin Hoods," Doc Thorndon said softly.

"Robin Hoods?" she frowned.

"Bet you five credits it's something he dug up out of one of his old books," Johnny Norsen snorted.

"You'd win then," Doc said. He turned his face to Kathy to explain. "The original Robin Hood was an outlaw who robbed from the rich but gave to the poor — a very long time ago. Since then, every time a bandit makes a practice of being kind to the poor, they've called him a Robin Hood." He added, dry of voice, "Very seldom do they deserve the name."

She was interested. "Oh? Well, does this . . . what was his name, again . . . ?"

"Jackie Black," Mart Bakr offered. As usual, he was sitting on the edge of his chair, eyes riveted on the girl to the point that should have caused acute embarrassment.

She went on, "Yes, this Jackie Black — that's a silly name, isn't it? Does he deserve the name, Robin Hood?"

Doc Thorndon shrugged, wrinkling up his cheerful face. "I suppose you'd say he does. Probably the principal reason he's eluded the authorities for so long. He has had considerable support from the rank and file citizens."

Johnny Norsen said, "Well, what is it that he got this time? They've got half the police of three planets on his trail and as far as I can understand, all he stole were some papers."

Dick Roland said, "I heard some rumors, just before we left Terra, that the papers were inside dope on a bunch of the bureaucrats — really incriminating. The story is that Jackie Black figures on blackmailing them."

Doc Thorndon grunted. "Doesn't sound like the sort of thing he'd do. Blackmail is a pretty nasty business."

Mart Bakr said, "Well, let's get on with this news wire. Maybe they've caught him by now."

She was on her way to the crew's mess, but Dick Roland found time to slip a note into her hand, flushing furiously as he did. She winked, infinitesimally, but hurried her way past him.

His heart thumped over twice, then curled up in its corner and glowed heat. Did that wink mean . . . ?

Kathy entered the crew's mess

and smiled at the assembled men who were off duty.

"All right," she said cheerfully, "it's your day — or night, whatever it is — who can tell on a space ship? What shall we do this time, boys? Do you want to draw lots to see who plays cards with me?"

One of the spacemen growled, "I don't see why the officers get your company the same amount of time we do. There's five of them and forty of us. It ain't fair."

She looked at him in mock reproach. "Why don't you get up a petition?"

Woodford muttered, "On a space cruiser, on a mission? They'd string us up by the thumbs."

Kathy tossed her head and laughed at him. "You see. You don't really care. My company isn't nearly as important to you as you'd make believe."

Jak Heming scrambled to his feet and faced the rest. "She's right! Why don't we? Why should forty of us have to share her time equally with only five? It's not as though this was an ordinary situation. How often do you have women aboard a space ship? I say, let's all sign a petition. We should have Kathy's company six days out of the week, they, only once."

"Boys, boys," she laughed.

But they continued to mutter among themselves and the sounds of their voices went higher.

THERE was an almost inaudible knock at the door.

"Who's there?" Kathy called.

"It's me."

There was silence for a moment, then, "Just a moment — *me*."

By the time she opened the door, he was glancing fearfully up and down the corridor. He slipped in.

"Why, Johnny."

"*Darling!*" He reached for her but she avoided him as adroitly as possible in the tiny quarters.

"Why, Johnny Norsen. You know you're not allowed in here. What would Commander Gurloff say? Besides, I thought you were the one who was so sorry to see me on board."

He was hurried, but emphatic. "Look, darling, Kathy. I didn't know then. I . . ."

Her eyes were mocking.

He held out a hand. "This ring. It was my mother's . . . I . . . I want you to wear it." His angular face was very intent and very sincere.

Her eyes widened now. "Why, Johnny "

"Listen, sweetheart. I know these aren't the circumstances. That nothing could . . . well, develop here in the ship. But when we return, when we're back on Terra again, I'm going to give up the space service and we can —"

She interrupted him with a

finger on his lips. Her eyes were on the floor now so that he couldn't see the glint of amusement, but she said softly, "I'll . . . I'll keep the ring, Johnny. We can talk about it when . . . when we're back again. No, you'd better go." She avoided his arms again. "Everybody would be angry if they knew you'd been in here."

After he'd gone, she put the ring in a small drawer — with a dozen others.

THE sick call was almost daily growing in magnitude and Doc Thorndon didn't like it. Not a bit. The cruise still had half way to go. He was amazed that they'd hung on this far, actually, but six

months was still too long a period to stretch before them.

He applied various tests to the last of his callers and then flicked a stylus against his teeth in irritation as he considered the findings.

Rosen said, worriedly, "What is it Doc? Not . . . not cafard, is it, Doc?"

Thorndon looked down at him and laughed gently. "Ever had even a touch of cafard, Rosen?

"Well, no sir. But I saw a man with it once." Rosen's eyes went nervously about the ship's hospital. The room was about the size of a bedroom of a Pullman of the 20th Century. It had two bunks, one above the other, a tiny folding table, a medicine chest built into the titanium alloy wall, a lavatory.

Doc Thorndon chuckled. "Don't worry. You'll know it when you get space cafard."

Rosen shuddered. "Yes, sir, I know. The fear of black space. The terror of free fall. Complete, berserk hysteria." The little crewman's eyes went empty.

Doc patted him on the shoulder. "Forget about it, Rosen. Haven't you heard? There hasn't been a case of cafard on this ship since I've been ship's doctr." His face tightened subtly. "By the way, what's this I hear about some of you crew members tapping the tract-torpedoes for alcohol and brewing up some jungle juice?"

The crewman was surprised. He hadn't heard about it. But he came to his feet and began shrugging back into his coveralls. He said, warily, "Where'd you hear this, Doc?"

Thorndon laughed cheerfully. "Never mind, and don't worry about it, Rosen. In fact, it wouldn't hurt you to try a little of it. Get your mind off your worries."

Rosen looked at him, shocked. Nothing was more taboo in space than drinking.

"Get on with you," Doc laughed and shooed him from the room.

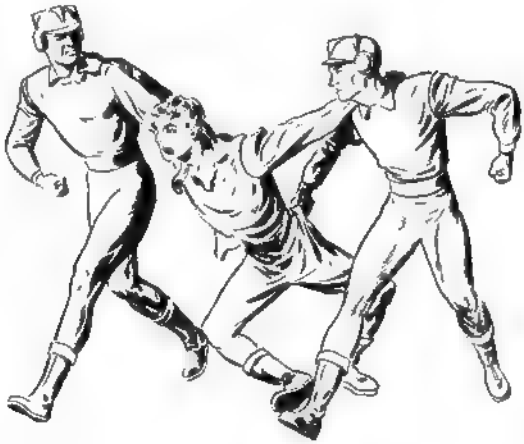
After the other was gone, the doctr sank down to the side of the bunk and emptied his lungs in a sigh which touched on despair. *Six more months to go.*

Kathy put her head in the door and said, "Doctr Thorndon?"

He looked up. "Come on in, Kathy. I'm through for the day and I have some suggestions for you."

She entered and closed the door behind her. She leaned back against it and looked at him thoughtfully, and once again he reminded himself that she wasn't attractive — really. It was her aggressive personality, that and her obvious femininity. You seldom saw mammary glands like . . . He pulled his mind away from that trend of thought. Doc was masculine too, and not *that* old.

*"What's this I hear about some of you crew members tapping the tract-torpedoes and brewing up jungle juice?"*



"Well, Kathy?" he said wearily.

She said, "I think I've finally figured out just what you're doing."

"You have? Well. I'm not surprised. You're not a very stupid person, Kathy." He didn't look up as he talked. "How many of them have proposed to you this week?"

"Four. Lieutenant Roland, and three more of the crew members."

He snorted, amusedly. "I'll wager you'll have hooked two thirds of them before the cruise is over." The amusement left him. "*If* it's ever over."

She said, very softly, "It's even more than usually important that the ship get back, isn't it?"

He looked up at her, without speaking.

She said, "I've been picking up odds and ends, here and there. I don't know too much about politics, but from what the crew says, and the officers too, for that matter, Commander Mike Gurloff is pretty big potatoes in reform politics back on Terra."

Doc rubbed the end of his nose with a thoughtful forefinger and wondered just how much to tell her.

She said, "It's pretty important that he get back, isn't it?"

Doc Thorndon said slowly, "More than just get back, Kathy. He's got to return with his reputation as strong as ever. He's got

to be able to throw into their faces just what tricks the present administration has been pulling on him."

She sank into the one chair the room boasted. "Are we going to make it?"

Doc pursed his lips. Finally he said, "The odds are against it, Kathy."

They sat silently for awhile.

Doc took a deep breath. "By the way, Kathy, I just had Rosen in here, you know, the signalman. He's in the first stages of cafard. He doesn't know it yet, but he is."

Air hissed through her teeth.

He nodded, seriously. "We've got to snap him out of it, but quick. One bad case, and it'd spread through this ship like wildfire. Now this is what you'll have to do . . .

She listened very carefully and nodded. The two of them looked like a pair of conspirators, leaning toward each other, their faces very serious.

COMMANDER GURLOFF looked up and down the corridor, spotted no one and slipped into the ship's hospital. He closed the door and turned to Doc Thorndon who was lying on the bottom bunk reading.

Doc looked up from his book and said, "Hello, Mike. Have a seat."

Mike Gurloff scowled at him, but lowered himself into the indicated chair.

He said, "Doc, what the kert are you trying to do with my ship and crew? The whole command is falling apart."

Doc Thornton put a finger in his place. "Oh?" he said

"Yeah. *oh*. Don't act so innocent." Gurloff hesitated, then went into the matter that bothered him in some detail. "Doc," he said, "You've always had a lot of leeway on the *New Taos*. Of course, it's not just the *New Taos*, any ship's doctr on any space craft on a long cruise has lots of leeway — as much as he needs to fight off the threat of space cafard. Maybe you've had a bit more than most, but maybe that's because you've accomplished more than most."

The doctr reminded him softly, "We haven't had a serious case of cafard since I've been aboard, Mike."

In an earlier age, Commander Gurloff would have knocked on wood. Now he shuddered. "All right," he said, "I'll take that. But this time, Doc, I'm afraid you're going too far. What's this about stun gun fights between crew members down in the tract-torpedo room? What's this about gambling going on, more or less openly, and the crew being on the verge of mutiny because of Kathy? What's this about Mart Bakr and Dick Roland starting a fist fight

in the wardroom the other day? And Rosen going on duty soused to the eyeballs?" His voice became more incisive. "Discipline aboard this ship is falling apart, Doc. And, to my surprise, I seem to find your fine meddlesome finger in every case I note that's adding to this collapse."

The doctr nodded. "That's right," he said agreeably.

"*That's right?*" Gurloff blurted. "What do you mean? I come in here expecting you to have some explanations of your actions and here you merely say it's true, that everything I've accused you of is true."

"It is," the Doctr said mildly.

"That you're inciting the crew to mutiny, that you're encouraging fighting and drink, that —"

"Yes," the Doctr said.

Gurloff blinked at him. Stared for a moment. Then came to his feet. He stood, looking down at the other, the back of his hands on his hips. He was incredulous.

He snapped, "Doctr, you realize that a crew without discipline is incapable of running a ship?"

"Let us say that it's incapable of running a ship indefinitely."

"And you say that you're deliberately encouraging a collapse of half the rules in the service?"

Doc sat up, putting his feet on the deck. He said, very seriously, "Mike, how long have we been out thus far?"

The other scowled. "Somewhat over six months."

"How many cases of space cafard, so far?"

The answer was a growled "None."

"Without books, without games, without any entertainment, for all practical purposes, we're through half of this cruise without one case of mental collapse, and that in spite of the fact that the crew had less than two weeks rest after the last trip."

Mike Gurloff leaned back against the bulkhead and scowled at him. "You mean you're preventing cafard by —"

Doc Thorndon leveled a finger at his skipper. "I'm preventing the complete collapse of this crew by every method I can devise. I can tell you right now, *if* we ever get back to Terra, this crew as a unit, will probably never be fit to take a ship out again. It was you, Mike, who said we had to make the cruise; you said that if you could make it you'd be in a position to upset the corrupt bunch of bureaucrats that are running the space service now.

"All right, Mike Gurloff, I believe in you. I'm trying to get this ship back before it turns into an asylum of howling, raving maniacs. It's taking every dirty deal, every little trick, every bit of double dealing I can think of to keep monotony and boredom, the breeding ground of cafard, from setting in."

"Including using that girl, Kathy, to keep the men in a continual dither?"

"Definitely! She's my best weapon."

Mike Gurloff thrust his hands into his tunic pockets and stared, unseeingly, at the medicine chest. He muttered, "There's one other thing, Doc, that I hadn't thought of before."

"Yes?"

"It's true that the *New Taos* has become the most popular craft in the fleet. Why?"

Doc Thorndon said indignantly, "For good reason! In the past two or three years it's made at least four cruises with outstanding success against the Kradens. Every time the *New Taos* returns from a cruise, it has a victory to report. Why —"

"Every time but this time, Doc," Gurloff said wearily. "And how long does a hero remain in the public eye when he slacks off on his heroism?"

Thorndon frowned.

Gurloff said, "Doc, this time they've sent us off on a year's cruise into empty space. There's nothing in this direction. No enemy, no galaxy that we'll reach. No nothing. When we return — after a full year of being out of the news — we'll have nothing to report." He thought it over for a minute. "I wouldn't be surprised if the powers that be so time it that just about when the *New Taos* berths, some other ship, with a skipper and crew more amenable to the present administration, hits the headlines with some outstanding deed. Just you watch."

He turned on his heel, mumbled a farewell, and left. Mike Gurloff was beginning to show both his age and the accumulated bitterness of years of having his career thwarted.

Doc Thorndon gazed after him, and rubbed the end of his nose with a thoughtful forefinger. "I hadn't thought of that angle," he said out loud.

It was the traditional toast of the officers of a space ship after a successful cruise, held in the ship's wardroom only moments after landing and immediately before opening the hatches.

Commander Mike Gurloff had brought the bottle of stone age brandy from his quarters and was filling the glasses. He said, spiritlessly, "Where's Doc Thorndon? If anybody is to be given credit for bringing us through this time, it's him."

"Saw him just a few minutes before landing. He was talking with Kathy," Johnny Norsen said.

"Well, let's get about it, gentlemen," Gurloff growled. He took up his glass and eyed them, one by one. "My last cruise, gentlemen," he said, his mouth a straight line.

They stood there, holding their glasses, their eyes widening.

He said tightly, "Surprised, gentlemen? What could you expect? It's either that or they'd have this craft out into space in another week or so. — And this time, we *wouldn't* come back."

They said nothing. There was nothing to say. Each took down the drink, stiff wristed. Then they set their glasses down on the small table.

Dick Roland flushed noticeably and said, "As a matter of fact, sir, the same goes for me."

All eyes went to the second officer.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mike Gurloff rapped. "Your career has just started."

Dick Roland squared his shoulders and said, "Kathy and I are going to be married and —"

"*What!*" Johnny Norsen blurted, angrily. "Are you trying to make a fool of —"

"Marry *you?*" Mart Bakr yelled. "Kathy and I are engaged. *I'm* the one that's quitting the space service and —"

Johnny Norsen spun on him, then back to Roland. "Is this supposed to be some stupid joke?" he bit out. "Kathy and I are —"

Gurloff was looking from one to the other of them in utter astonishment.

"Boys, boys," a voice from behind them said softly. They turned, each still sputtering his indignation. It was Doc Thorndon.

"In the first place," he said mildly, "polyandry is still illegal on Terra and the latest statistics show that Jackie — that is, Kathy — is engaged to forty-three of this ship's complement of forty-five officers and men."

There were four different ejaculations, but he went on. "And, in the second place, in spite of his capable disguise over the past year, Jackie Black is a very masculine character, and I doubt if he'd be interested in marriage — not to anybody of the male sex."

They were dumb. It was just too much to assimilate.

Doc Thorndon handed an envelope to Commander Gurloff. "Jackie Black thinks you'll be able to use these documents in your next speech, Mike. You didn't bring home your usual victory, perhaps, but you'll draw your usual attention!" He rubbed the end of his nose with a forefinger and grinned, cheerfully. "When he saw what a hornet's nest he'd awakened when he swiped them, he could figure only one way of avoiding the regiments of police on his trail — he stowed away on a craft scheduled to be off in space for a year's time. His disguise as a woman went still further in preventing his identity from being guessed."

Gurloff was thumbing through a sheaf of papers in the envelope.

"You mean, that all along he planned to hand these over to someone who would expose —"

Doc shrugged. "I don't know, Mike. Maybe not. But I think that little story about Robin Hood rather appealed to him. Besides, I was rather persuasive, just before he left the ship."

The Doctr turned to go.

"Just a minute," Gurloff snapped, his face dark. "How long have you known the identity of this — this criminal Jackie Black? Just because these papers are now in our possession doesn't mean we can brush away his existence on my ship for a year. We have a duty to perform. *Where is he?*"

The doctor allowed himself only the faintest of grins. "As to how long I've known . . . well, I've suspected for some time, really, that our Kathy wasn't quite as feminine as she'd like to have us all think. I —"

Dick Roland, still in a semi-state of shock, blurted. "But . . . but . . . Kathy . . . I thought she was so womanly. So . . ." he reddened again.

The Doctr cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, my first clue was based on that very fact. In one of my old books I ran into the slang word, *falsies* and —"

"The kert with all that," Gurloff blurted, "Where is this criminal? Our duty is still to apprehend him."

The Doc said, "I'm afraid that 'Kathy' was the first man off the ship, Mike. Must have been ten minutes ago. Seems to me I saw him leave by way of the torpedo hatch."

Gurloff was weakening, but he grumbled, "Just because he turned these papers over to you doesn't give him the right to escape the punishment that —"

Doc said patiently, "Good grief, Mike, how sadistic are you? After what that poor man's been through the last twelve months with this ship full of Romeos, you want to punish him *further*."

For an instant there was silence; then Mart Bakr grinned ruefully. "I guess you got a point there, Doc."

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(*Concluded from page 33*)

TERRA STAY AWAY FROM DIRBANU AND DIRBANU WILL STAY AWAY FROM TERRA. THIS IS NOT A SUGGESTION. TAKES EFFECT IMMEDIATELY.

"Why that bunch of bastards!"

Rootes pounded his codewriter, and although they circled the planet at a respectful distance for nearly four days, they received no further response.

* * *

THE LAST THING Rootes had said before they established the first stasis on the way home was: "Well, anyway — it does me good to think of those two queens crawling away in that lifeboat. Why, they can't even starve to death. They'll be cooped up there for *years* before they get anywhere they can sit down."

It still rang in Grunty's mind as he shook off the blackout. He glanced aft to the glass partition and smiled reminiscently. "For years," he murmured. His words curled up and spun, and said,

*. . . Yes; love requires the focal space*
*Of recollection or of hope,*
*Ere it can measure its own scope.*
*Too soon, too soon comes death to show*
*We love more deeply than we know!*

Dutifully, then, came the words: *Coventry Patmore, born 1823.*

He rose slowly and stretched, revelling in his precious privacy. He crossed to the other couch and sat down on the edge of it.

For a time he watched the Captain's unconscious face, reading it with great tenderness and utmost attention, like a mother with an infant.

His words said, *Why must we love where the lightning strikes, and not where we choose?*

And they said, *But I'm glad it's you, little prince. I'm glad it's you.*

He put out his huge hand and, with a feather touch, stroked the sleeping lips.

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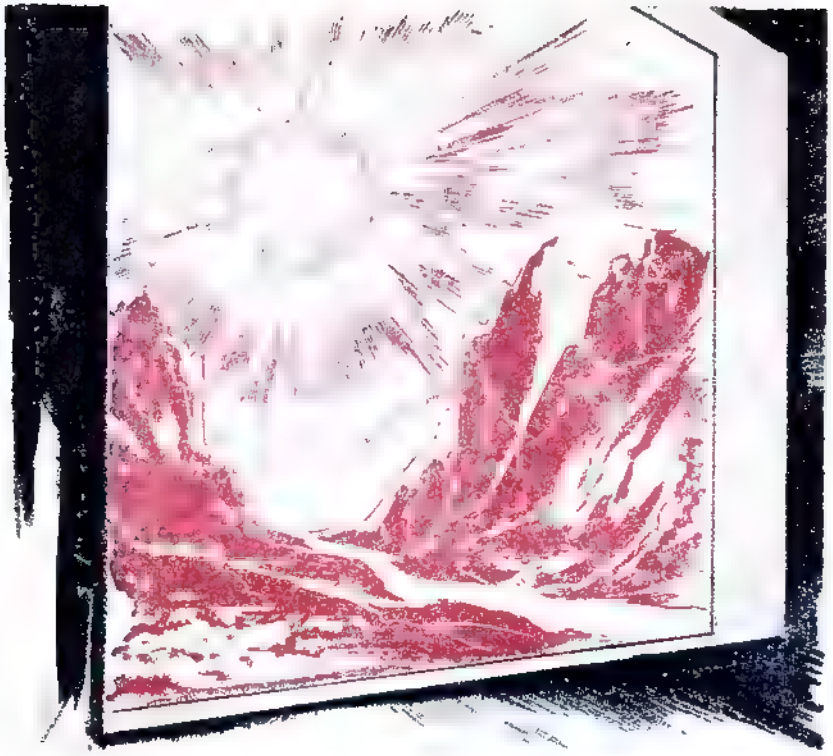

THERE would be no final day, for Earth could not last beyond the dawn. There would be this night, then a brief interval of morning, and then nothing.

It would be swift, efficient, final. The sun would claw hungrily at the horizon, feeling the mountains with fingers of fire and turning them into bright liquid. The sun would rise for the last time, a grim giant, large and terrible. And then it would be over. Within seconds, the last bulwark would go and Earth would be a bright cinder, a memory, a speck of light still seen by some distant star for years to come and then be suddenly blotted out, a fact recorded with other minute data and forgotten.

George and Laura sat together staring into the darkness of the final night, waiting.

"It should have been three billion years from now," she whispered. "Three billion years!"

"The calculations were okay," George said, "barring chance.

# THE END

## by Charles E. Fritch

But that's the loophole, that 'barring chance;' there's always a loophole, there has to be because calculations are never wrong. They're only changed to accommodate new factors. Like the fact that the Earth won't wait to be destroyed in three billion years, for instance, but on January 22, 2027 AD, about 5:00 a.m. E.S.T."

He glanced again at his watch; the numbers glowed like cold fire in the darkness of the room.

"What time is it?"

"Four-thirty-five."

"Less than an hour." She shivered.

"Cold?"

"No," she said. "Not cold."

He put his arm about her.

Before them lay the range of mountains which were the last barrier between them and the sun. The other side of the Earth was already burning, shriveling grass and trees and hills and mountains and continents. The water was boiling away in great clouds and the very air was afire.

"It seems funny," she said, "to see the mountains with no snow.

How warm do you suppose it is?"

"Pretty warm for January," he said. "If we were out there now, we'd probably be parboiled."

Abruptly they became aware of the air conditioning units purring softly in the room, making the air comfortable. Science did have some correct answers, it seemed. After awhile, the sounds seemed to fade as they gazed into the starry night.

She said, "I wonder what it'll be like."

"It should be quite a thing," he said. "I'd like to have the popcorn concession for this show."

"Please," she said, "no jokes."

"Okay," he said quietly. "No jokes."

She was right, of course. It *was* no time to joke. He had wondered what the last night would be like, how he would react. He tried desperately to tell himself that it wouldn't matter, that Earth was just a speck of dust in the universe and that its existence or destruction was of no consequence.

But that was not the way it was at all. He had lived on that speck of dust; he and Laura had lived there happily, despite the attempts made to incite war and hate to destroy the dream they had forged; they had expected to live there peacefully for a good many years more, watching the youngsters grow, playing with them in the long cool grass on summer evenings. He did not mind so much for himself, but the children —

"How are Bill and Jackie?" he wondered.

"Sleeping. Do you think we should wake them?"

"No," he said. "No, let them sleep."

She nodded. "I don't suppose there would be any point in it."

"Only frighten them," he said.

Even as we are frightened, he thought grimly, and trying not to show it.

It was all so sudden, the way it had happened. There was no meeting of the United Nations, no rendezvous of military leaders, no bickering or haggling. Nature didn't work that way. There was just one decision, with everything else subordinated to it.

Strange, too, the way the wars had stopped — suddenly, with the realization that it was meaningless, that the acquisition of anything was now useless. He was surprised it had been so, humans being human. There were a few outbreaks of rioting and looting, of course, but they were put down. Everyone wanted to become friendly in the face of God; it might be their last chance.

Like many others, he still didn't know exactly how it had happened. He'd heard the bulletins on the radio and television, read the theories and explanations offered in newspapers and magazines; but he wasn't certain he

cared. Something about the sun and its system passing through a cloud of cosmic dust. Why that should cause the sun to overheat he didn't know. The thing to remember was that it would — and did.

Remembering was no problem. The first few days and nights had been spectacular. He recalled the meteorites bursting in flaming ribbons of blue and red and green, crisscrossing the skies in bright streamers that whistled and shrieked like frightened banshees. It was a million Fourth of Julys rolled into one, a technicolor production of the End of the World. It was awesome, frightening.

But it was not the end, merely the prelude, the celestial announcement of things to come. More calculations of the scientists; the hushed secrecy surrounding them; the final, inevitable pronouncement.

*The Earth was doomed!*

The announcement came six months ago. Some people thought it was a joke, a very unfunny joke indeed. But it was cold, hard fact. The sun would turn into a small nova, reach out with a flaming hand to grasp the Earth. And that would be that.

People prayed. People wept. People went quietly and not so quietly mad. Some committed suicide. Others built rockets. Businessmen who kept the space platform from being a reality offered to provide money necessary to build rockets which would carry them to safety. But money was useless now. It was strange that a form of equality should come so late.

He stared at the mountains without seeing the orange halo about their peaks. "Right out there," he reminisced, "is where the rocket stood." He sighed proudly. "It took a lot of work, but we did it."

She nodded, remembering the long hours, the increasing heat, the longer hours. The hurried fitting of section onto section, like a frantic jigsaw puzzle. The installation of motors that could not be pretested. The hydroponic tanks. The cattle. The seeds. The humans —

Many who worked on it could not go, for there was not enough room. Straws were drawn; some won, others lost. Some would go aboard the rocket to bid for survival; others. . . .

"And right from here," he said, remembering, "we sat and watched it rise into the sky, bearing the hopes of humanity with it. Like a skyrocket, a silver wand, a breath of fire."

"Yes," she said, "it was beautiful."

"Beautiful," he said. He stared at the sky. "There were other rockets, in all parts of the world. I wonder if they got away."

She didn't answer. She was

gazing at the silhouette of the tall mountains, the fringe of color growing about the peaks.

"It won't be long now," he said. His fingers gripped the edges of the chair.

The sky was glowing.

She turned away. "I don't want to look at it," she cried suddenly. "It's too horrible."

"*I* want to look at it," he said. "If it hadn't happened this way, mankind would have done it anyway, with an atom bomb or a hydrogen bomb or a God only knows what kind of a bomb. They'd have found a way!"

He stared at the range of mountains in a kind of fascination. The mountains were turning red. The sky behind them was afire.

"Here it comes," he said. "Here — it — comes!"

He did not look at her, but he knew she was staring at it, too, hypnotized by the sight. The end of Earth, the end of Earth, the end, the end. . . .

"George!" She gripped his arm.

The mountains became glowing coals, they danced in shimmering brilliance, they melted into gleaming cataracts that flowed like golden rivers into the valley, smoking. Behind them, the sun rose into view, magnified a millionfold, a great white mass that encompassed all. Their eyes went aflame. The Earth exploded in a sea of fire.

Laura screamed.

Darkness. . . .

The cooling darkness of the room swept in upon them, and Earth and the heat and flame were gone, millions of miles in the space behind them. They sat together in awed silence, breathing heavily, hearing only the air conditioning and the dull throb of the rocket motor deep within the spaceship's belly. They watched the television screen as though expecting more, perhaps some miraculous rebirth of the world that was.

"The transmitter probably vaporized immediately," he said, after awhile. He stood up. "Well, Laura, it's all over."

"Yes," she said wearily, "all over for poor, tired Earth. And now what?"

He shrugged. "Maybe Bill and Jackie and the other youngsters will know — eventually; or maybe their children or their children's children, if they can hold out that long. The spaceship may go on for generations before they find a suitable world. They may never find one."

"Then all we can do is teach what we know and hope they can build another Earth."

"Not another Earth, Laura," he amended gently. "A *better* one."

Arm in arm, they strode from the room to join the others. For Earth it was the end. For humanity it was only

THE BEGINNING

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